

**Thursday
3 February 2022**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 3 February 2022

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

South Western Railway

1. **Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with representatives of South Western Railway on the adequacy of its service levels. [905397]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Wendy Morton): Along with Department officials, I am in regular dialogue with South Western Railway about its service levels. I have also recently met all managing directors of the train operating companies, including the managing director of South Western Railway, to discuss service provision, among other key industry topics.

Fleur Anderson: I am glad the Minister is holding meetings with South Western Railway, as Putney residents have faced dreadful service from SWR for years, with overcrowding, delays and the cancellation of trains. Currently, they are on a temporary timetable—a chaos omicron timetable. The Prime Minister announced in Prime Minister's Question Time that that timetable would end on 19 February, but that seems to be news to SWR. Did he inadvertently mislead the House?

Wendy Morton: As I explained to the hon. Lady, my officials and I are in regular dialogue with SWR, working hard on the issue of services, because we absolutely understand that it is what matters to passengers right across the country. Services will be restored as soon as possible.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): I very much welcome the news from the Prime Minister yesterday that services in Dorset and across the west country will be returned on 19 February. Will the Minister share with the House how we got to the place where an entire region of the United Kingdom—Somerset, Dorset, Wiltshire and Devon—had its direct service to London completely severed and slashed in half, without MPs even being told about it?

Wendy Morton: I assure my hon. Friend that the Department continues to work closely with rail operators, as we work through mitigating the impact of staff absences on rail services. I assure him that the current temporary rail timetable is exactly that—temporary—but it is providing passengers, especially the country's key workers, with certainty, so that they can plan as much as

possible, with the confidence that we want. I really hope that as staffing pressures start to ease, alongside passenger demand increasing, we will see those rail services, which are key, starting to increase accordingly.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I am sure that the whole House will join me in wishing my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) a speedy recovery from covid.

Rail commuters in towns and suburbs across the land did their patriotic duty: they stayed home when asked by the Government at the start of the pandemic. They were told after that that if they did not go back to work, they were shirkers. Then, before Christmas, the Government asked them to stay home again. Now, on their return, they find that fares, including on South Western Railway, have risen by nearly 4%, on a reduced service. Do this Government take rail commuters for fools?

Wendy Morton: We absolutely do take passengers—[Laughter.] We absolutely do take passengers very, very seriously. I assure the hon. Gentleman of that, and I am not taking any nonsense such as the language he is using, not given the amount of support that this Government have shown to the rail industry throughout the omicron situation and the covid-19 pandemic more broadly.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Clearly taking its lead from South Western Railway, Southern has suspended all direct trains on the Brighton line into Victoria, meaning that my constituents along the south way have to change twice, which they calculate is adding about a third to their commuting times. That is completely unacceptable. Given the special funding arrangements between the Department for Transport and Govia Thameslink Railway, what compensation can be given to my constituents or, better still, what pressure can the Minister bring to bear on that company to provide a decent service again, at last?

Wendy Morton: I share my hon. Friend's frustration and, as I said in response to earlier questions, we have been supporting the industry heavily throughout covid-19. During the omicron part of the pandemic, the industry has been handling staff absences, but this is absolutely about getting those services back up and running as soon as possible. I assure him that that is what we continue to focus on.

Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency

2. **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of challenges facing driving licence and other services at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. [905398]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): Online services continue to operate normally. The DVLA has introduced new online services, recruited extra staff and secured extra premises.

Mike Amesbury: In the past three months alone, I have received 26 complaints about delays at the DVLA—

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con) Hear, hear!

Mike Amesbury: I know that this is reflected right across the House. One of those complaints came from Greta. Greta has ill health, she is disabled and she is reliant on her vehicle. Will the Minister intervene? Let us turbocharge this process, not only for my constituents, but for those of Members right across the House.

Trudy Harrison: I assure the House that online applications are not subject to delays and customers usually receive the documents within two to three days. We strongly encourage customers to use online services where possible. I pay tribute to the DVLA staff who have worked overtime and provided extra resources and extra sites. I am pleased to say that of the 36 cases the hon. Gentleman submitted, 32 have been closed, and I am following up the remaining four.

Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government's investment of £96 billion in the railways is the biggest investment in the rail network ever? By reinstating the Northumberland line running through Blyth Valley to Newcastle—

Mr Speaker: Order. That is not related to the question about the DVLA. [*Interruption.*] One of us will have to sit down and I am not sitting down. I am sorry, but that is not even linked to the question. Supplementary questions must be linked to the original question tabled.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): In my constituency there is huge dependency on the private car. Given the huge backlogs arising in the DVLA, and the similar backlogs at the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency, many young people are being deprived of their independence and find themselves isolated both socially and from work and education opportunities. In the light of this situation, the recent DVSA decision to close Whitchurch driving test centre is a hammer blow to people who want only to improve their quality of life. Will the Secretary of State commit to keeping this important facility open and thereby removing the necessity of people paying for double lessons and driving for an additional hour just to practise or attend a test?

Trudy Harrison: I am more than happy to meet the hon. Member to discuss the matter in detail. The Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency is working hard to increase driving test availability by recruiting more driving examiners, offering out-of-hours tests and asking all those who are qualified to conduct tests to do so. I reiterate my willingness to meet the hon. Lady.

International Travel Restrictions

3. **Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con):** What recent progress he has made with Cabinet colleagues on easing international travel restrictions for UK nationals. [905399]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): On 24 January, the Secretary of State announced to the House that all testing requirements will be removed for eligible fully vaccinated arrivals.

Andrew Rosindell: Given the success of the roll-out and the welcome news that the plan B restrictions are ending and will end, with travel restrictions set to end

on 11 February, will the Minister please assure the country that we will never again go back to travel restrictions of that kind? The latest travel restrictions seem to have had very little effect and the damage done to our economy was vast.

Robert Courts: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct: thanks to the success of our roll-out and booster programme—the fastest in Europe—we are now in a position where we can live with covid and start to travel again. The Government are developing a more flexible model, including a contingency playbook to deal with future variants that will provide certainty to consumers and industry alike.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response—he has definitely been on his Weetabix this morning, so he has.

My question is on a specific issue. As filling out a passenger locator form per traveller takes a long time, has consideration been given to providing group application facilities, whereby families can fill in their details as one and save themselves the stress of having to fill out multiple applications in a foreign country so that they can return home safely?

Robert Courts: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent suggestion. We have committed to looking into and radically simplifying the way that the PLF works. It remains necessary for now but I shall take that suggestion on board and consider it in any upcoming review.

Condition of Roads

4. **Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con):** What steps he is taking to improve the condition of roads in England. [905400]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): The Department is investing more than £5 billion over this Parliament in local highways maintenance—enough to fill in millions of potholes a year and resurface roads throughout England.

Gareth Bacon: The Mayor of London is considering a daily charge of £2 to drive on Greater London's roads that would slap more than 2.5 million people with a substantial new driving bill. My constituents, like those in many places in outer London, rely on their cars to get around because the public transport alternatives are inadequate. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Mayor should look at more creative ways to fix Transport for London's finances instead of planning highway robbery?

Trudy Harrison: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend: hammering motorists is not the way to do it. Transport in London is devolved to the Greater London Authority and therefore decisions on road-user charging are for the Mayor of London, not the Government. We will continue to work with the Mayor to help him put TfL on a sustainable long-term footing, but it is exactly as my hon. Friend said: creative solutions need to be put forward.

Mr Speaker: I welcome shadow Minister Gill Furniss.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Last year, the Chancellor told people to enjoy National Pothole Day before the potholes were all gone. He then slashed the road maintenance budget by £400 million—enough to fix millions of potholes. Thanks to those broken promises, the roads Minister's own community has become the pothole capital of England. The Government talk about levelling up, but in reality they cannot even level up the surfaces of our roads. When will the Minister get a grip, reverse these broken promises and deliver the funding that communities need to sort out the mess on our roads?

Trudy Harrison: Actually, at the spending review, the Government announced £2.7 billion over the next three years for local road maintenance in places not receiving those city region settlements, which is enough to fill in millions of potholes a year, repair dozens of bridges and resurface thousands of miles of road. The three-year settlement will help local authorities plan effectively for managing their highway assets, tackling those potholes and other road defects across local road networks.

Rail Services: Yorkshire

5. **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve local rail services in Yorkshire. [905401]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): The Government are committed to improving rail services across the north of England, and rail passengers in Yorkshire will already be benefiting from our recent £161 million investment in Leeds station. The recently published integrated rail plan outlines our ambitious £96 billion investment plan for the next 30 years.

Jason McCartney: I welcome the integrated rail plan, which is investing in the trans-Pennine route coming through my patch in Slaithwaite and Marsden, which the Minister has visited. As he knows, though, I have another line—a single track line—going through Huddersfield and Penistone to Sheffield. I have been supporting the levelling-up bid of my hon. Friends the Members for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) and for Dewsbury (Mark Eastwood). Will the Minister continue to work with us so that we can get investment in this single-track line that will lead to real positivity for local connectivity in our part of the world?

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend remains a real champion for his constituency. I can reassure him that the integrated rail plan confirms that the Government will continue to invest in smaller rail enhancements across the north and the midlands in addition to the trans-Pennine route upgrade, HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend and his colleagues to discuss this, perhaps on a future visit to his constituency—probably later this month.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): According to the original plans, trains should now be arriving in Sheffield on the electrified Midland Main Line. When will the first electric trains actually arrive?

Andrew Stephenson: I am delighted to confirm that we have shovels in the ground on the Midland Main Line electrification. The Secretary of State was pleased to visit those works just before Christmas. As part of the £96 billion integrated rail plan, we will be delivering benefits to passengers sooner than ever anticipated.

Electric Vehicles

6. **Cherilyn Mackrory** (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): What recent progress he has made on supporting the roll-out of electric vehicles. [905402]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): The Government continue to support the uptake of electric vehicles. About as many electric vehicles were sold in 2021 as the last five years combined, with one in six cars now having a plug.

Cherilyn Mackrory: I thank the Minister for her answer. In Cornwall, there is clearly an appetite to move towards cleaner and greener transport, and Cornwall Council is currently rolling out a £3.6 million project to install and operate EV charging points across the county. Despite that huge step in the right direction, given Cornwall's rurality, it is limited in scope. Can the Minister help me to encourage towns, businesses and constituents in my Truro and Falmouth constituency to make use of the Government's electric vehicle home-charge scheme, which provides grant funding of up to 75% towards the cost of installing electric vehicle charging points?

Trudy Harrison: I commend Cornwall Council, and I also commend my hon. Friend for the work that she is doing to ensure that we have this transport revolution as we transition from a fossil fuel transport system to one that is decarbonised. Electric vehicle charge points are absolutely the way forward at home, at work, en route, and at destination. This Government are rolling out the charging points with local authorities, and I would be delighted to visit her constituency and work with her council to do so.

Modern Railway: 200th Anniversary

7. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Whether he has plans to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the modern railway in 2025. [905403]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Wendy Morton): Railways are a product of Britain's rich history of engineering innovation and the 200-year anniversary is a nationally important moment to mark and celebrate. The Department for Transport will work with the whole industry to make this a special event for workers and passengers alike.

Rachael Maskell: Clearly, in York the 200th anniversary will be incredibly significant, with both the reopening of the National Railway Museum, which will be an incredible moment, and the opportunity it gives us to look not just back but forward at the future of rail. Will the Minister therefore work with us to promote the future of digital and civil engineering, and focus on those from minoritised groups and women, to ensure that they have their place in the future of the railway too?

Wendy Morton: The 200-year anniversary is an important one. I recall many visits to the National Railway Museum when I was a kid; we used to go on school visits there.

On the hon. Lady's point about skills, engineering and more diversity, yes, absolutely—I am really keen, as I am sure are all my colleagues on the Front Bench, to see more diversity in the railways.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What a wonderful way to celebrate that anniversary: setting up a scheme to help small stations in economically important towns such as Milford Haven in my constituency to access funding in a timely way to see an upgrade. The current process, whereby Network Rail works up a project and then it takes years and years of multiple rounds of appraisals—big money-spinners for the consultants—just does not work. Will my hon. Friend please look at that?

Wendy Morton: I am more than happy to pick up on that point. If my right hon. Friend wants to tell me more about his local station, which he is clearly passionate about supporting, I would be happy to meet him.

Rail Services: South-east London

8. **Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): What plans he has to help improve services for rail passengers in south-east London. [905404]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Wendy Morton): Department officials are working closely with operators in south-east London, including SE Trains—Southeastern—and Govia Thameslink Railway, to ensure that a reliable and punctual service is delivered as passengers return to work. Performance on both SET and GTR has been at a good level throughout the pandemic, with some recent challenges on GTR, owing to a high level of driver absence, leading to a temporarily revised timetable.

Matthew Pennycook: The Minister will be aware that both Southeastern and Thameslink services in south-east London are running on a reduced timetable. With the restrictions having eased and growing numbers of my constituents once again needing to commute, that cut in services is beginning to cause overcrowding on not only trains, but local bus and tube services, as well as incentivising more people to jump into their cars. Can I get a commitment from the Minister today that those withdrawn services will be fully reinstated as soon as possible?

Wendy Morton: I understand the concerns of colleagues across the House when it comes to trains and passengers. I assure the hon. Gentleman, as I have assured other colleagues this morning, that we continue to work closely with rail operators as they mitigate the impact of staff absences on rail services. It is important that we work together to get people back to work.

UK Supply Networks

9. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with representatives of (a) haulage companies and (b) other companies involved in the goods supply chain on disruption in the UK's supply networks. [905405]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): Ministers have been in frequent contact with transport operators and industry regarding supply chain disruptions.

Martyn Day: The Road Haulage Association estimates a shortfall of some 85,000 drivers, affecting supply chains, retailers and the wider economy, while the Government's short-length temporary visa scheme has been unfit for purpose, with only 200 visas having been issued. Given the scale of the problem, the industry is asking for a 12-month visa for heavy goods vehicle drivers. Will the Minister confirm whether that is being considered?

Andrew Stephenson: The Government have taken decisive action on the HGV driver shortage, with 32 short, medium and long-term interventions. We have more than doubled the number of tests available for HGV drivers in a normal week from 1,500 weekly appointments pre-covid to 3,200 in a normal week now. I am pleased to hear from industry bodies that their current assessment is that the shortfall in drivers is lessening.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): That may well be the case, but one haulier has likened Brexit to

“death by a thousand cuts”,

as EU companies withdraw business due to each new round of post-Brexit bureaucracy, administration and delays. That is causing significant hardship for many UK and Scottish businesses; smaller ones, especially, are struggling to cope. After the UK implements import controls in July, the crisis will deepen further, with the current miles-long queues of HGVs on the A20 simply getting longer and longer. What are the Government doing to mitigate the damage they have inflicted with Brexit on the UK's economy?

Andrew Stephenson: I know that the hon. Gentleman likes to blame Brexit for everything, but of course there are HGV driver shortages around the globe. On freight coming in and out of the UK, we are seeing similar numbers at the moment as we would normally. The checks that are due at the ports are on track in England. Of course, in Scotland, they are a matter for the devolved Administration. We are aware of some risks there, but the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and other Departments are working closely with the Scottish Government to find a resolution.

Closed Rail Lines: Restoration

10. **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): What steps he is taking to restore previously closed rail lines. [905407]

13. **Sara Britcliffe** (Hyndburn) (Con): What steps he is taking to restore previously closed rail lines. [905410]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): We are committed to reversing the Beeching cuts and reopening railways through our £500 million restoring your railway fund. I was pleased to reopen the first such line—the Dartmoor line—in November 2021.

Damien Moore: Does my right hon. Friend agree that restoring the Burscough Curves link, which would connect Southport with Preston and up to Glasgow via the west

coast main line, should be a priority for the Government, both to demonstrate the levelling-up agenda and connect all regions of our great United Kingdom?

Mr Speaker: It would be a good idea.

Grant Shapps: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend—and, it seems, yourself, Mr Speaker—that it would be a great idea. My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for the people of Southport. I know he applied unsuccessfully for the first round of restoring your railway fund money, but I am very committed to working with him on that to link up his community. I will arrange to meet him. I spoke to him about it this week and I am arranging to meet the Rail Minister on the subject.

Sara Britcliffe: We are moving forward with the Rawtenstall to Manchester line, which would significantly benefit my constituents in Haslingden, but will the Secretary of State provide the House with an update on the Skipton to Colne railway line?

Grant Shapps: I certainly can. Regarding the Skipton-East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership—or SELRAP—and the rail link between Skipton and Colne, I appreciate my hon. Friend's unstinting support for the scheme and will set out our position on the projects in the rail enhancement portfolio very soon.

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): Good morning, Mr Speaker. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the residents of Levenmouth and East Neuk of Fife, who will see their rail link restored more than 50 years after it was abolished by his predecessor? Yet another Westminster cut reversed by Scottish Parliament as part of the transition to net zero. Does he agree that the glacial progress on reconnecting communities in England to the national rail network is hindering growth, compared with the Scottish Government's record of delivering real benefits for the people of Scotland?

Grant Shapps: No, I do not agree. It has taken 50 years for a UK Government to come along and reopen the lines that were closed under Beeching and successive Governments. We are the ones reversing that and paying to reverse it, and Britain is proud of that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): If we are really going to celebrate the 200th anniversary, it would be good to open even more lines. You will know, Mr Speaker, that not far from your constituency, the first person to be killed on the railway was a Member of Parliament and Minister when the Rocket was being trialled. We should remember that.

If we are serious about marking the anniversary and bringing the old lines back into use, will the Secretary of State look again at Yorkshire? We feel absolutely bereft. Here is this opportunity, with a Government commitment to raise standards and level up, at a time when the Government have smashed the integrated plan for Yorkshire rail.

Grant Shapps: Huddersfield massively benefits from the £96 billion plan—the biggest plan that any Government have ever announced on railway funding. By the way, it is bigger than the plan that President Biden just announced

for railways in his package, even though the United States has a population that is five times bigger than ours. I would have thought that people in Huddersfield would be celebrating in the streets.

Fuel Duty Freeze

11. **Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con):** What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the impact of the fuel duty freeze on people (a) in Harlow constituency and (b) across the UK.

[905408]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): I regularly speak to the Chancellor about the impact of the fuel duty freeze, which has now run for 12 consecutive years, in no small way thanks to my right hon. Friend.

Robert Halfon: My Harlow constituents strongly welcome the fuel duty freeze, and long may it continue. When wholesale oil prices rise, the cost at the pump rockets. The RAC and FairFuelUK have shown that average profit margins for diesel have increased by 150% in the past two years, with petrol margins at the pumps more than doubling. But when the global oil price comes down there is a feather approach; the savings are not transferred to the motorist. Will my right hon. Friend introduce a pump watch monitor to ensure fair prices at the pumps for motorists?

Grant Shapps: It is genuinely true to say that there is not a more expensive Member of Parliament because the cuts—or the freezes—that my right hon. Friend has persuaded successive Chancellors to make are now accumulating a £1,900 saving for a UK driver every year. He is right that when oil prices go up fuel prices seem to track very fast, and when they come down they are much slower. I will pay close attention to his idea.

Aviation Sector

12. **David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con):** What steps he is taking to support the aviation sector. [905409]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): We have delivered approximately £8 billion of support for the aviation sector through the pandemic, and we are currently developing a strategic framework to help support the sector's recovery.

David Duguid: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. Has he given any thought to how public service obligations could help support regional airports right across the UK, including in Scotland—such as Aberdeen airport, which serves my constituency—to recover from the covid-19 pandemic?

Robert Courts: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. May I congratulate him on his campaign and his support for his constituents' campaign, particularly that led by Val Fry, to reintroduce flights to Aberdeen such as the easyJet flight from Aberdeen to Gatwick? I have flown from Aberdeen. I can see its importance, and I know that it is exceptionally important particularly for the offshore energy industry. We recognise the significant impact that covid-19 has had on regional airports. We will consider whether there are further opportunities to utilise public service obligations.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Having failed to secure a sector-specific deal from the Treasury, the industry is recovering much more slowly than our international competitors, and now we have the spectacle of an unholy row between airlines and airports on landing charges. With the new rules on slots, we have the prospect of planes flying empty or with half loads. Industry leaders tell me that the Secretary of State has been missing in action, but he has been busy shoring up the beleaguered Prime Minister's whipping operation—we would like to thank him for that. Is it not time for the Secretary of State to step up to the plate when it comes to aviation?

Robert Courts: The Secretary of State and all members of the Government have been in constant contact with the aviation sector, and it is through that that we have been able to tailor our response. We have given £8 billion of support to the sector. The airport and ground operations support scheme is on top of that, and there is the aviation skills retention platform. The Government wholeheartedly support the aviation sector, particularly in getting it flying again.

Ticket Inspection

14. **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of ticket inspection by rail operating companies. [905411]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Wendy Morton): The Government have consulted on changes to penalty fares to ensure that deterrents against fare evasion are effective and fair. Fare evasion costs other rail passengers and taxpayers, who ultimately subsidise the journeys of those who deliberately travel by train without paying the correct fare.

Martin Vickers: I thank the Minister for her reply, but my experience is that ticket inspection falls very far short of 100%. As she says, the cost ultimately falls on other passengers and the taxpayer. What further steps can she take to ensure that the companies bear the burden of their inadequacies rather than the taxpayer?

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and he is right to take this seriously. I can assure him that the Department continues to encourage train operators to prioritise revenue protection and ensure that revenue is maximised and fraud is prevented. He is right to say that it is the responsibility of train operators to follow Government guidance in relation to this.

Public Transport: Night-time Safety

15. **Ian Byrne** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to improve night-time safety on public transport. [905413]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): The Government recognise the vital role that safe public transport plays in getting people to and from where they need to be at night. The Department works closely with transport partners on a range of initiatives to ensure safety on the transport network.

Ian Byrne: Many of my constituents feel vulnerable taking public transport at night, especially women and those returning home from late shifts at work. Will the Minister support Unite the union's "Get Me Home Safely" campaign and the early-day motion of my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana), which calls for the extension of the employer's duty of care to include safe transport home and policies such as making free night transport for staff a pre-condition for new liquor licences?

Trudy Harrison: I thank the hon. Member for his interest in this important issue. We are already doing much on the transport network to improve safety, particularly for women and girls—for example, the rail to refuge scheme helps four people a day. We have also recently undertaken a review with our transport champions to look specifically at the safety of women and girls. I would be happy to meet him to understand how those proposals align with the recommendations from our champions.

Transport for London: Financial Settlement

16. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What recent progress he has made on agreeing a long-term financial settlement with Transport for London. [905414]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): It is for the Mayor to take decisions about how to balance the TfL budget. We are committed to supporting the system and have done so with hard cash—£4.5 billion and counting.

Bob Blackman: As my right hon. Friend knows, the current deal expires very soon. The Mayor was due to provide ways that he would balance the budget; I understand that he has not done so yet. Could my right hon. Friend confirm that in any arrangements that he makes with the Mayor of London, we will exclude the outer London charge for people driving into the London area and stop the Mayor introducing road pricing in London unless the whole country goes ahead with it?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is a terrific champion of a fair settlement. It is the easiest thing in the world for someone to propose a tax that people other than their own residents pay, which is exactly what the Mayor has been pursuing with the boundary tax. It is not fair; we will oppose it—no taxation without representation.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): The Government's piecemeal funding for Transport for London is short-sighted and, yet again, will have an impact on thousands of jobs across the entire country. For every £1 spent on London's transport infrastructure, 50p is spent outside the capital. We know that they have the money after yesterday's news about the latest Government wastage—£9 billion blown on dodgy PPE about as effective as the Prime Minister's Save Big Dog strategy.

Some 30 TfL projects currently support thousands of jobs around the country from Wrightbus in Ballymena in Northern Ireland to Bombardier in my constituency. That includes a £1 billion contract for building tube trains in Goole in East Yorkshire. Is it not time for the

Government to save jobs across the country, stop rolling out the rhetoric and start investing in London's transport infrastructure?

Grant Shapps: The trouble is, when someone writes that kind of passage in advance and practises it in front of the mirror, they potentially miss the announcement that was made in the original answer. We have now spent £4.5 billion propping up TfL to help out, rightly, because of the pandemic and, in addition, because of decisions that failed to be made earlier, such as on the four-year fare freeze and the concessions that go way above anything available elsewhere in the country.

Rockets and Satellites

17. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to support the launch of rockets and satellites from UK soil. [905416]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): My Department has passed legislation paving the way for space flight and satellite launches from UK soil, and we have already awarded £40 million of grants to kick-start capability.

Jerome Mayhew: I recently discussed the current rocket launch environment with Gravitilab, a dynamic Broadland company that provides microgravity testing and space access via reusable launch platforms. Its ambition is to provide that service in Norfolk. Space is no longer just for Governments and multinationals, so will my hon. Friend ensure that our regulatory regime recognises and encourages start-up companies and is made responsive to that fast-rising sector?

Robert Courts: I gladly join my hon. Friend in celebrating the growing success of Gravitilab. I congratulate him on being an excellent advocate for it, Broadland and the space industry as a whole. The Government have put in place the most modern space flight legislation in the world. We will continue to review it to ensure that it meets the needs of the UK's entire space industry.

Cycling and Walking

18. **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What plans he has to publish a second cycling and walking investment strategy. [905417]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): The Government plan to publish the second cycling and walking investment strategy in the spring.

Ruth Cadbury: I thank the Minister for the answer. I am concerned that the Treasury has clearly decided that £2 billion is all the ringfenced funding that will be allocated for cycling and walking, but the Department for Transport commissioned research several years ago that apparently says this £2 billion is only a quarter to a third of what is needed to meet the stated aims of the Government to increase cycling and walking by 2025. Can I ask if she will now publish this research, as a former Transport Minister, the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), repeatedly promised two years ago?

Trudy Harrison: I am delighted to confirm that we have now appointed Chris Boardman as the acting CEO of Active Travel England, which I will be meeting after this session.¹ Actually, the £2 billion is an unprecedented amount to be investing in walking and cycling over this Parliament. Our investment is already seeing results: levels of cycling increased by 46% in 2020 compared with 2019. However, I would like to put on record my thanks to the hon. Member for the work she does on the all-party parliamentary group on cycling and walking, which I look forward to joining.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I cycle for 10 hours a week, and on a narrow forest road I always cycle close to the kerb, because I am a driver too and I want to accommodate drivers. The advice in the new code that I should cycle in the centre of the carriageway is bonkers, isn't it?

Trudy Harrison: I would like to stress that that advice is only on narrow roads, but I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has embraced cycling, because we want to see half of the journeys made in towns and cities walked or cycled by 2030.

Bus Service Improvement Plans

19. **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of funding for bus service improvement plans. [905418]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): At the Budget, we announced £1.2 billion of new dedicated funding for bus transformation deals. We will provide details of indicative allocations in due course.

Mohammad Yasin: Bus companies have suffered financially during the pandemic, and this cost is being felt by customers in downgraded services. Stagecoach has had to replace its coaches from Bedford to Cambridge with double-decker buses with no toilet facilities. This leaves older people, sometimes travelling to access medical treatment, without access to a toilet for 90 minutes. When will the Government give bus companies the investment they need to improve services?

Robert Courts: Well, we are doing that at the moment. There is £1.2 billion of new funding, delivering improvements in bus services, fares and infrastructure in England outside London, and that is just part of over £3 billion of new spend on buses in the course of this Parliament.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I was delighted to see in the levelling-up White Paper yesterday that, thanks to this Conservative Government working with Conservative-led Stoke-on-Trent City Council and three Conservative Stoke-on-Trent Members of Parliament, we are going to receive a multimillion-pound settlement for bussing back better in our great city to make sure that we are better connected. Part of the bid does contain some funding for roads, particularly for widening the Waterloo Road, which does suffer from congestion, so will the Minister meet me and Stoke-on-Trent MPs to discuss why it is vital that this is funded?

1.[Official Report, 7 February 2022, Vol. 708, c. 8MC.]

Robert Courts: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the leadership he has provided on improving the roads and the buses in Stoke in conjunction with his Conservative colleagues, and I know that the Buses Minister will be delighted to meet him to discuss that further.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): In the north-east, we have an ambitious bus service improvement plan, but before we get there we have a crisis in our bus services as a result of covid-19. Can the Minister say what action he will take to prevent our bus services from being reduced as a result of the cliff edge in funding in March?

Robert Courts: As I have outlined, over £3 billion of new spend on buses is coming along during the course of this Parliament. The hon. Member is quite right to draw attention to the bus service improvement plans, and we will be able to provide some information on indicative allocations for that by the end of February.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): Buses are vital for many of my North West Durham constituents, but to put it simply, at the moment there are not enough of them and they are prohibitively expensive, especially for single-fare journeys. Will the Minister look closely at our bus back better strategy for the north-east to give us the funding and the buses we need for our communities?

Robert Courts: I know that the Buses Minister will be delighted to look at that particular strategy in the context of the overall funding the Government are providing.

Docklands Light Railway

21. **Abena Oppong-Asare** (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Transport for London on proposals to extend the docklands light railway to Thamesmead. [905420]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Wendy Morton): The Government and Homes England are exploring potential opportunities and options at Thamesmead and Beckton Riverside with the Greater London Authority and Transport for London.

Abena Oppong-Asare: Thamesmead in my constituency needs levelling up. It has some of the worst public transport links in the capital. There are ambitious plans to extend the docklands light railway to Thamesmead, which are supported by Greenwich and Newham councils and Transport for London. Will the Minister look favourably at these proposals when they are submitted to the Government, and provide the necessary funding to finally put Thamesmead on the transport map?

Wendy Morton: With regard to extending the DLR, the scale of the opportunity from the potential options at Thamesmead and Beckton Riverside is being explored and the Government and Homes England are working together with the Greater London Authority and Transport for London to do this.

Topical Questions

T1. [905421] **Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): I would like to update the House on action we have taken against the behaviour of Insulate Britain activists. Last year I asked National Highways to seek injunctions against the so-called eco-warriors who have inflicted such misery on motorists across the country, and following the latest High Court hearing yesterday a further five immediate prison sentences were imposed as well as 11 suspended sentences against Insulate Britain activists for breaching these injunctions. That brings the total number of sentences and suspended sentences handed down to 31.¹ Gluing oneself to the tarmac and throwing paint on public highways, causing miles of misery, just is not on; it affects hard-working people and causes misery to them, costing the taxpayer money.

Ruth Jones: The Secretary of State will know that vehicle standards, including for e-scooters, are reserved to Westminster. I am hugely concerned about the impact of e-scooters on people living with sight loss in Wales as they cannot be heard and are very quick. What plans does he have to assess the impact of the already widespread and illegal use of e-scooters in Wales?

Grant Shapps: We currently have a trial programme for e-scooters, with 31 trials in operation, which is collecting the data that the hon. Lady seeks. I share her concerns, particularly about e-scooters sold through the private market where they are not legal to be ridden on the roads or pavement, or indeed in the public arena. We are looking at measures that will crack down on those while ensuring that those that have been properly insured and used through the trials continue until we have all the data.

T2. [905422] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): Last week-end's storms have led to the temporary closure of the railway from Norwich to Lowestoft. Good services on that Wherry line and the east Suffolk line are vital if meaningful levelling up is to be delivered to the Waveney area. Can Ministers confirm that the Government are committed to improvements on these two lines and that their ambitions extend beyond that suggested by Network Rail, which is that it aims to have a climate-resilient service on the Wherry lines in 28 years' time?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Wendy Morton): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this matter today, and I appreciate the incident on Sunday near Haddiscoe will undoubtedly have caused disruption to passengers, but I understand that work is going well and I am sure he will be pleased to know that services are expected to resume on Saturday morning. Network Rail recently outlined its long-term adaptation ambitions, which are now being considered at local level. Importantly, this will help build greater understanding of the key areas of vulnerability that are critical in the development of plans to mitigate and minimise impacts on passengers.

1. [Official Report, 8 February 2022, Vol. 708, c. 10MC.]

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I welcome the new Rail Minister, the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), to her post. Last year the Prime Minister promised

“great bus services...to everyone, everywhere”,

with £3 billion of new funding to support that. Yesterday we learned the truth about the transformation funding—slashed by £1.8 billion. Why have the Government broken their promise and downgraded the ambition of communities?

Grant Shapps: I am really pleased that the hon. Lady has raised this, because I have seen her tweet and talk about it elsewhere and I want to inform her that she is inadvertently misleading. The figure is still £3 billion; the £1.2 billion is a part of that £3 billion and there are other elements of funding that have already been announced, including £0.5 billion on decarbonisation, and more money is on the way. So that is simply an incorrect figure that I ask her not to continue to repeat.

Louise Haigh: I can assure the House that I am not the one misleading anybody. We have it in black and white, in a leaked letter from his own official, who wrote to local transport authorities confirming the cut and saying

“the scale of the ambition across the county greatly exceeds the amount”

of transformation funding. Doesn't that say it all: the ambition of this country far exceeds that of the Government? So will the Secretary of State come clean by admitting that vast swathes of the country will not get a penny in transformation funding and that he sold bus transformation but is delivering managed decline?

Grant Shapps: No, that is absolutely incorrect. We have just heard about this Government's investment in Stoke. That is investment we are going to spread across the country. It is false to claim that that £1.2 billion is the total funding. It is not, as I have already pointed out. There will be £5.7 billion over five years for the city region sustainable transport settlement, for example, bringing more money in. I will write to the hon. Lady with a detailed breakdown, but I ask her to take into account the full amount of money being spent on buses—a record never achieved before by any Government, as far as I can see.

T4. [905425] **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): At a meeting I chaired between East West Rail and residents in the town of Winslow in my constituency whose houses back on to the new railway, we were disappointed to learn from East West Rail that it plans to launch with diesel-only trains borrowed from another railway. Will my hon. Friend make an intervention with East West Rail to ensure it launches with bi-mode trains that can run on battery where the railway comes close to people's homes in towns such as Winslow and villages such as Verney Junction and Newton Longville?

Wendy Morton: I know that my hon. Friend takes a close interest in this issue on behalf of his constituents, as I would expect. I would be very happy to have a meeting with him, at which he can share with me some of the concerns he has on behalf of his constituents.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is two years since the Prime Minister pledged 4,000 zero-emission buses, but that pledge is in tatters. Not a single bus has been ordered through the fast-track zero-emission bus regional areas scheme. In contrast, the Scottish Government have already produced the equivalent of 2,700 bus orders. No one in the industry—not a single person—thinks that the Prime Minister's pledge will be met, and let us remember that 4,000 is only one tenth of the English bus fleet, while Scotland decarbonises half of its bus fleet. When are the UK Government going to get real on this?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): The Government remain absolutely committed to supporting the introduction of 4,000 zero-emission buses and achieving a zero-emission bus fleet. I had the joy of visiting a place in Glasgow, when I was there for COP26, that is rolling out those buses, and this will support our climate ambitions, improve local transport for communities and support high-quality green jobs. Overall, we are providing £525 million of funding for ZEBs this Parliament, and the Government have provided funding for 900 zero-emission buses through existing funding schemes.

T5. [905426] **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Were the brilliant bus recovery grant to end, at current passenger number levels, I could lose half of my services. Will the Secretary of State consider extending but tapering it, so that more services have a chance to recover passenger numbers to economic viability?

Trudy Harrison: We will of course look into my right hon. Friend's suggestion, but over the past two years we have provided over £1.7 billion in covid-related support to the bus sector. The recovery grant is worth more than £250 million to operators and local authorities, and has been supporting the sector as passenger numbers remain suppressed.

T3. [905423] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The fleet of turquoise-coloured buses—they were like a cross between a minibus and an Uber; called Slide buses—that were increasingly being seen on the streets of Ealing and Sutton just before covid abruptly had the plug pulled on them by social distancing. Can I ask the Government to reintroduce these immediately, as we are coming out of the crisis, as a way of combating excessive car dependency? Also, women liked them because they took them directly to their door—they were demand-responsive buses. Will the Secretary of State do this or, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) said, are we in Ealing exempt from levelling up these days?

Grant Shapps: If the hon. Lady is exempt from levelling up, we need to have a word with the Mayor of London about it, because transport in her constituency is run by him, of course. On a serious note, I am very interested in that scheme, and I will speak to her about it offline.

T6. [905427] **Dame Andrea Leadsom** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): The HS2 Minister was kind enough to visit my constituency to see for himself the damage being caused by the preparation alone for this train project.

He will be aware that ever more areas of South Northamptonshire are now being ruined and dug up just in preparation for the line. What steps can he take to make sure that they do not become a place for fly-tipping, which we are seeing all too frequently?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): HS2 Ltd takes its responsibilities to secure and maintain land along the line of route extremely seriously. I thank my right hon. Friend for taking the time to show me some of the specific problem sites when I visited her constituency. Where fly-tipping or littering occurs, HS2 Ltd must act to address it as soon as possible.

T7. [905428] **Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), I am afraid the Secretary of State's response just reflects the fact that his approach to this issue is laissez-faire and complacent. People on both sides of the House will tell him that there is a real problem with these scooters. The Government's policy is encouraging a disrespect for the law, because people are riding them with impunity. As he will know, crashes in London alone went up by 3,000%. Will he really get a grip on this issue? Everybody knows it is a real problem, but he is denying it.

Trudy Harrison: I thank the hon. Member for his question, but I refer him to the 31 trials currently ongoing throughout the country to identify how we can legislate in the safest possible way. We regard micro-mobility as an essential part of the transition towards a much cleaner community, but I will endeavour to meet colleagues in the Home Office to discuss matters of policing with regard to illegal electric scooters.

T9. [905430] **David Johnston** (Wantage) (Con): I most often raise the need to reopen Grove station in my constituency, but today I want to raise my constituency's roads. In addition to the ongoing safety issues on the A34 and A420, the general condition of roads gets worse and worse, as a result of thousands more houses and more and more cars. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss how the roads in my constituency can be better maintained?

Grant Shapps: We would be very pleased to organise that meeting with my hon. Friend. I will set up a meeting for him with the Minister with responsibility for roads. As the House knows, we are spending £24 billion on roads and at least half of that is for their upkeep and maintenance.

T8. [905429] **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): With a bunch of parents in Saughall in my constituency, we have been trying to put together a package for school bus transport that would save hundreds of car journeys a week. It is predicated on a successful Bus Back Better bid, but the word from the Treasury is that that money will be halved. Will we get the full amount that Cheshire West and Chester Council bid for?

Trudy Harrison: That decision is yet to be taken, but in terms of the hon. Gentleman's council and the money it is missing out on, it is disappointing to learn that in Chester the green bus technology fund, the low emission

fund, the ultra-low emission fund, the all-electric bus city fund and all the zero-emission bus regional area funds have not been taken advantage of by his council. I really would encourage him to work with his council to make the most of the generous offers provided by the Department.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Airlines have had a tough couple of years, of course, but so too have passengers and travel agents in obtaining refunds from those airlines. This has been going for years. Reform is badly needed, with a regulator that has upfront powers to effect change. I am delighted to see the Government's consultation. Can I ask the relevant Minister when we expect to see change implemented?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I commend him for his work on this and a number of issues. The consultation on consumer rights has just been launched. We will be running that and carefully considering the options that come out of it. We will be looking to make the necessary changes as soon as possible.

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): The Scottish Government are currently rolling out free bus travel across Scotland for anyone under the age of 22. Will the UK Government take a moment to congratulate the Scottish Government and tell us when they might deliver the same for young people in England?

Grant Shapps: The difficult decisions that need to be made have to be made by every Government, but I think what the hon. Lady was pointing out was just how generous the grant funding is, through the Barnett formula, for the Scottish Government.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State agree to an urgent meeting with me and representatives of the business community in North West Leicestershire impacted by the Birmingham to East Midlands Parkway route of HS2, to discuss the necessary changes to the route to enter Parkway station and any possible mitigations?

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend remains a doughty champion of businesses in his constituency that will be affected by the proposals in the integrated rail plan. I would be more than happy to meet him again to discuss those proposals and the specific impacts on residents and businesses.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Further to the issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), south-east London is not served by the London underground, which means our constituents rely heavily on rail services. A station in my constituency where there has been a major redevelopment has seen a nearly 50% increase in footfall: there are 1.5 million entrances and exits a year. It is essential that capacity is maintained and increased on our rail services because of the lack of alternatives. May I impress that on Ministers who will make decisions on the franchise?

Wendy Morton: As I explained earlier, we are working closely with the rail operators as they mitigate the impact of staff absences on rail services. Obviously, as restrictions are lifted and staffing pressures ease, operators will reinstate services to meet expected increases in passenger demand. I think it is fair to say that no timetable is ever static. As demand patterns continue to evolve while we recover from the pandemic, timetables must be flexible.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): I welcome the massive investment this Government are making in the east midlands. They are electrifying the midlands main line as we bring HS2 from Birmingham to Nottingham. However, to benefit fully, my constituents need better trains to Nottingham. Will the Minister support my campaign for more trains on the Poacher line so that my constituents in villages such as Radcliffe-on-Trent can have the regular train service they need?

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend rightly points out the massive investment going into the east midlands. I am sure the Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), will be more than happy to meet her to discuss the specific configuration of local services.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): My constituents already face long waits for overpriced bus services without the real-time data that Londoners

take for granted, and now we hear that there will be further cuts to bus services. We urgently need a bus service improvement plan. Why will the Secretary of State not urgently support one?

Grant Shapps: As I have mentioned a couple of times, we have the biggest ever programme of bus service improvements. We have gone out to local authorities to ask them for their plans, and we have funded them to bring forward those plans. We are now coming back, including in announcements this week, with the first stages of that programme, as outlined in the “Levelling Up” White Paper. We will continue to deliver more on the bus agenda over time.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): There has been clear interest on both sides of the House in investment in the future of buses, and we have a very positive bid from North Yorkshire County Council, working with local bus companies, to improve the services in Harrogate and Knaresborough. Will the Minister give me an indicative date for when we might hear of that bid’s success?

Trudy Harrison: I am afraid that I cannot give a precise date at this time—there will of course be a date in due course—but I will make the necessary inquiries and relay back to my hon. Friend.

Mr Speaker: A relative date in the future. That is marvellous.

Business of the House

10.33 am

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 7 February will include:

MONDAY 7 FEBRUARY—Motion to approve the Social Security Benefits Up-Rating Order 2022 and motion to approve the Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2022, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill.

TUESDAY 8 FEBRUARY—Opposition day (12th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 9 FEBRUARY—Motions relating to the police grant and local government finance reports.

THURSDAY 10 FEBRUARY—Motion on UK-Taiwan friendship and co-operation, followed by general debate on the dementia research in the UK. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

At the conclusion of business on Thursday 10 February, the House will rise for the February recess and return on Monday 21 February.

The provisional business for the week commencing 21 February will include:

MONDAY 21 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 22 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the Charities Bill [*Lords*] followed by remaining stages of the Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 23 FEBRUARY—Opposition day (13th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the Official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 24 FEBRUARY—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 25 FEBRUARY—Private Members' Bills.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the forthcoming business.

Tomorrow is World Cancer Day, and this year's focus is on closing the care gap and recognising global inequities in cancer care. Here in the UK, figures show that one in three people with symptoms are not receiving the life-saving care within two months of an urgent referral from their GP that they need. This is a record, and not the sort to be proud of. Given the vacancies and staff shortages across the NHS, may I ask the right hon. Gentleman what the Government are doing to bring cancer waiting times down? Will he ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make a statement on, in particular, increasing early diagnosis for children with cancer?

While the Prime Minister is peddling far-right conspiracy theories in a desperate bid to deflect from his own rule breaking, working families are being hit with steep hikes in energy prices, low wages falling even further and a triple whammy of Tory tax rises. The right hon. Gentleman has previously demonstrated his socialist

tendencies and expressed his support for our calls for the scrapping of the national insurance rise that will unfairly hit working families, but the Chancellor and the Prime Minister have not listened. In fact, this Government's tax hikes for working people and businesses mean that we will have the biggest tax burden in 70 years. I wonder whether the Chancellor will be addressing that shortly.

As if that were not bad enough—this affects Conservative Members' constituents as well—10 years of the failed Tory energy policy has left us uniquely exposed. Dither, delay and incompetence have created an energy price crisis faced by everyone, and the Government are choosing to leak their policies in the papers rather than coming to this House first; but perhaps it is wise to try and roll the pitch when all their announcements will do is push more costs on to working people further down the line. Labour's fully funded measures to cut VAT on energy bills would save households £200 a year, and an extra £400 for the families and pensioners who need it most, without stacking up debt lower down the line. The Government have so far chosen not to support that plan, but it is not too late, given that our motion on Tuesday to introduce a windfall tax on oil and gas companies to pay for it was passed unanimously. Can the Leader of the House confirm that the Chancellor will be announcing this as part of the forthcoming business?

It has taken the Government two and half years to come up with a 10-year plan to do 12 things. It will now take them until 2030 to deliver things that they first promised back in 2010: that is a gap of 20 years. Can the Leader of the House explain what the Government have been doing for the last 12 years? Whatever it is, it certainly is not levelling up.

While the Government are reaching into people's pockets for their hard-earned cash with one hand, they are giving it away to fraudsters with the other: £4.3 billion-worth of fraudulent loans have been written off by the Chancellor, £3.5 billion has been spent on crony contracts, £300,000 went from the levelling-up fund to save a Tory peer's driveway, and half a million pounds went on the Foreign Secretary's flight to Australia. Does the right hon. Gentleman think that this is an acceptable use of taxpayers' money? Can he explain when it became Government policy to waste taxpayers' money on fraudsters, private jets and driveways?

While I am on the subject of the levelling-up fund, let me add that on 24 January the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), said that my constituency of Bristol West and the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), the shadow Education Secretary, were among those that had received levelling-up funding. I have checked, and as far as I can see Bristol has received no funding and nor has my hon. Friend's constituency. Will the Leader of the House please ask the Minister to correct the record?

We have all been horrified and appalled by the report from the police watchdog, published earlier this week, which uncovered the disgraceful conduct of some serving officers at Charing Cross police station: abusive, racist, misogynist and disrespectful messages routinely shared between officers. This is not just an issue in London, so

what is the Home Secretary doing to overhaul police training and restore public confidence in our police forces?

This is a Government who have completely lost their grip. Working people are paying the price for a decade or more of dither, delay and incompetence. The Government are out of control, out of touch, out of ideas and soon to be out of office.

Mr Rees-Mogg: What a delight it is to hear from the hon. Lady every week, running through her socialist mantra. She is, of course, right to highlight the importance of cancer and cancer care, particularly the treatment of children. I am glad to say that treatment rates for cancer are now back to their usual levels. Since the pandemic began, over 510,000 people have started treatment for cancer. We have provided record taxpayer spending to tackle the backlog, with £2 billion this year and £8 billion over the next three years, to deliver an extra 9 million checks, scans and operations for patients across the country. I am very pleased that we can be in agreement that the right things are being done after the period in which we have been suffering from covid, which did lead to an increase in the numbers awaiting care.

The hon. Lady then mentioned far-right conspiracy theories, which seemed to be in relation to the Leader of the Opposition, so let me quote his own words. The right hon. and learned Gentleman said:

“I accept the conclusions reached by Ms Levitt QC and, in the interests of transparency and accountability I have decided to publish her report in full. In doing so, I would like to take the opportunity to apologise for the shortcomings in the part played by the CPS in these cases.

But I also want to go further. If this report and my apology are to serve their full purpose, then this must be seen as a watershed moment. In my view, these cases do not simply reflect errors of judgment by individual officers or prosecutors on the facts before them. If that were the case, they would, in many respects, be easier to deal with.

These were errors of judgment by experienced and committed police officers and a prosecuting lawyer acting in good faith and attempting to apply the correct principles. That makes the findings of Ms Levitt’s report more profound and calls for a more robust response.”

This is about the traditional understanding of ministerial responsibility. Somebody who is in charge of a Department—and the right hon. and learned Gentleman was in charge of the Crown Prosecution Service—must follow the Crichton Down principle of taking responsibility for what went on in his organisation and then apologise for failings. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has apologised similarly for mistakes that may have been made in Downing Street. I think that what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, and that the geese and the ganders should not complain, one or the other. They are perfectly fair and reasonable points of political debate.

The hon. Lady then came on to issues concerning the police, which are deeply concerning and there was an urgent question on this yesterday. We expect the Metropolitan police and the Mayor of London to implement the recommendations of the Independent Office for Police Conduct report as soon as is practically possible. What came out over the past couple of days is deeply shocking and is not what we expect of the police. In this Palace we are so lucky, because we see the police who protect us and we talk to them. They do amazing

work for us, but then we discover that there are people in the police force, including ones who have been at this Palace, who let the side down desperately, shockingly and unforgivably. This must be rooted out, and the leadership of the Metropolitan police will have to ask themselves how they can put this right and have culture change, as we in politics have had to adopt culture change. That is fundamentally important, and I encourage the police to do everything they can to deal with that.

The hon. Lady also referred to questions relating to fraud and the bail-outs provided. It has to be said that £400 billion of taxpayers’ money was provided and 12 million jobs supported during the pandemic. The economy has got back to pre-pandemic levels, which is an enormous achievement and success. The policies that were followed were right. But fraud must always be cracked down upon, so the Government have stopped or recovered £743 million in over-claimed furlough grants and prevented £2.2 billion in fraud from our bounce back loan scheme, and the taxpayer protection taskforce is set to recover an additional £1 billion through investigations that are under way. It is really important that fraud is tackled and that, of course, is what Her Majesty’s Government are doing.

The hon. Lady then wanted to talk about matters pertaining to the Chancellor, but may I say that patience is a virtue, virtue is a grace, and Grace is a little girl who would not wash her face? If the hon. Lady reads the magic words on the Annunciator, she will see that all will shortly be revealed by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): May we have a debate on the levelling-up fund? We need to have great scrutiny of how these decisions are taken by civil servants and Ministers. My right hon. Friend has stood for Parliament in Shropshire and will know some of the problems we have in that rural shire county. Yet again, Shropshire Council has, unfortunately, failed in its levelling-up bid. May we have a debate on this so that our constituents are more cognisant of how these decisions are taken and so that there is more transparency?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his distinguished constituency and has been for many years. Levelling up needs to be looked at in the round and regionally. Wolverhampton, which is near Shropshire, is receiving considerable support, which will benefit the whole of the regional economy. What is happening is the transformation of the country’s infrastructure, which will be fundamental to levelling up, with £600 billion. It is also about attracting further investment—private sector investment—into areas, and that will depend on how regions do better together and succeed, looking at it as a rounded picture.

On having a debate, a statement was made earlier this week by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), but levelling up will be a major topic of discussion for this House in the weeks and months to come.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): We have missed the Leader of the House’s weekly “Newsnight” performance; after he shattered the

[Pete Wishart]

relationship with the Scottish Tories and declared the Mogg republic, the Tory press office must have decided he had run out of his usefulness, but we look forward to seeing him back again at some point. Although we are grateful for the statement this week on the Sue Gray report, what the House really requires is a full day's debate about all the issues contained in it, which should be led by the Prime Minister. We cannot simply leave aside a report that points to

"failures of leadership and judgment",

excessive drinking and a cultural failure at the heart of government, set against the backdrop of a deadly pandemic. Sixteen events fell within Sue Gray's remit, 12 of which are being investigated by the Met police. We cannot just leave that behind, perhaps for weeks. Members of the House must have the opportunity to properly consider all these issues, and our constituents would not expect anything else.

We also need an urgent debate about parliamentary discourse and how we hold Members accountable for the veracity and truthfulness of things said in this House. The thing that probably irks and frustrates our constituents most is when a Member says or claims something that is manifestly untrue and there is no way to have it challenged and addressed in this House. If a Member does raise an untruth in this House, he is likely to face your wrath, Mr Speaker. You are right that, according to precedent and to "Erskine May", you must take action and ask that Member to leave the House, but "Erskine May" was written before the days of the internet, fact checkers and the current Prime Minister. You said that the matter may be reviewed and you suggested the Procedure Committee be involved. Does the Leader of the House not agree that a general debate, like the one we are having on standards this afternoon, could also be useful in addressing this? When untruths go unchallenged and MPs can say anything, regardless of its relationship with the truth, it can only have a corrosive effect on our democracy and on trust in this House. Surely the Leader of the House agrees that that cannot go on.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think the hon. Gentleman takes the view that anything that is said that he disagrees with is not true. That is not right, which is why we have the forms of debate that we have. When people hold views strongly and somebody else stands up and thinks the other thing, they say, "That is not true", but it is not a matter of truth; it is a matter of opinion, which is what we discuss in this House. It is not a matter of fact-checking; it is a matter of, "I think X, the hon. Gentleman thinks Y," and both of them are views that people are entitled to hold. What we get from the Scottish National party constantly is the doubting of the good faith of the people they oppose, and that is quite wrong. That is the corrosive element of public life: the doubting of the faith and honesty of one's opponents. I disagree with a great deal of what is said by those on the side opposite, but I do not question the honesty and integrity of what they say. I question the effectiveness of what they do, and that is the important difference between the Government and the Opposition sides.

As regards the Sue Gray report, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was here on his feet for two hours, I think, answering questions earlier this week and has

said that the full report will be published when it is allowed to be published, after the Metropolitan Police have completed their work. That commitment has already been made—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman heckles—I hope *Hansard* heard it—that that is weeks away. If the police were not doing it properly, he would be the first to say, "The police aren't doing it properly!". He cannot have it both ways. It is being done properly and rigorously and, when it is done, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will ensure the full report is published. He comes to the House regularly.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Can we have a statement on value for money provided by local councils? Harlow's Conservative council, elected as a majority for only the second time in the town's history, is cutting council tax for residents by £55 and freezing it until 2025. That is possibly the highest council tax cut in the country. Can the Government send a taskforce to Harlow to learn how to cut the cost of living, as we provide an example that the rest of the nation should follow?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for highlighting the success of Harlow Council. It is amazing what good Conservative councils can do: we look at Westminster and Wandsworth, which for decades have been able to keep the council tax down when other socialist councils have kept on putting it up. Harlow should be held in light, not least for having my right hon. Friend to represent it, which he does with such distinction and panache. It is important to recognise that local council spending is the responsibility of local councils, and good, well-run councils—Conservative councils—are able to save taxpayers money.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for announcing the Backbench Business debates for next week. I understand there will be some time for the House to spend considering remaining departmental estimates—I believe it will be in early March—so hon. Members will need to be preparing to make applications to the Backbench Business Committee for time in those debating slots on the return from the February recess. I also remind the Leader of the House that we have date-specific applications on the stocks already, for Welsh affairs and St David's Day for the first week in March, and for International Women's Day for the second week in March.

Could we have a statement on the increasing use of off-road motorcycles for criminal purposes? We have a scourge of that in my own constituency; unfortunately the local constabulary, Northumbria police, having been hit by severe cost cutting, do not have any equivalent motorcycles with which to apprehend those individuals. Can we have a statement from the Home Secretary about what can be done by constabularies around the country to cut down on that menace?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful, as always, to the hon. Gentleman. I have done quite well so far this Session in providing him with the debates he has asked for when he has given me long notice; I cannot promise to be able to do the same, but I always try, if possible, to make time available for the time-sensitive debates. Off-road motorcycling, which has been raised by others in this House, is clearly a problem, but the police must set their own policing priorities. The Government have provided

the funding for, I think, an extra 11,000 police officers so far, with a target of 20,000 over the course of the Parliament. I encourage him to put further pressure on his local police force to enforce the law as it is. I do not think it is really for the Government to set policing priorities from the Dispatch Box.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Given that one of the principal benefits of Brexit is that we now have the ability to set our own laws, rules and regulations, may I have a statement from the Leader of the House on the reasoning behind the ending of the Regulatory Reform Committee on 20 May 2021, at the very time when it had the best opportunity to help to shape our regulations to make the UK economy a better place?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is very straightforward: legislative reform orders, which went to the Regulatory Reform Committee, are going to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee instead, and it seemed more sensible to bring that together with the Select Committee that is in charge of the interests of business, is fighting for business and is economically involved, rather than having a separate and expensive Select Committee. It is a question of efficiency—a legislative reform of our own within this House to save the taxpayer money.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Yesterday afternoon, I chaired a meeting here in Parliament with the Russian ambassador, which was interesting, to put it mildly, and obviously we talked about the crisis in Ukraine. Lots of us in the House want to help the Government to put in place proper sanctions, if necessary, in a timely fashion. Before the Foreign Secretary fell ill with covid—we wish her well—she announced to the House that a statutory instrument will soon come before us that is to be legal by next Thursday. It would be much better were the whole House able to show support for that SI in consideration on the Floor of the House, so that we could make clear our support for the Ukrainian people and our desire to make sure that jaw-jaw is more important than war-war.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support for Government policy in relation to Ukraine. Her Majesty's Government have made it absolutely clear that should a further Russian incursion into Ukraine happen, allies must enact swift retributive responses, including unprecedented sanctions. It is obviously right that any statutory instruments that come to the House are considered fully and I note the hon. Gentleman's request for a debate.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): We have a debate this afternoon on the Standards Committee review and report, which my right hon. Friend will know makes copious reference to the independent complaints and grievance scheme that was established in the House across party lines only a couple of years ago. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to look at the ICGS and non-ICGS complaints systems together, to make sure that our constituents and those who want us to serve them can see what is going on and that there is full transparency?

In particular, my right hon. Friend might be aware that the introduction of the ICGS was really focused on changing the culture of this place, which meant training

and proper induction for new Members and staff who come into this place, and it also meant exit interviews to find out why people do not stay. Those things are not happening; what can my right hon. Friend do to make sure that the system is properly in place and that the two different processes are aligned once and for all?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her work to foster culture change in the House of Commons and in the setting up of the ICGS, which would not have happened in the form in which it has without her energy and drive. It has been enormously to the advantage of the House of Commons. I am glad that the Chairman of the Standards Committee, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), is present in the Chamber, because I am sure he will have heard what my right hon. Friend had to say. There will be a debate later and it is important that all views about how things can be done better and differently are sent into the Standards Committee so that it can produce its report. My right hon. Friend's comments are extremely helpful and her experience makes them particularly valid—*[Interruption.]* I think the Chairman of the Standards Committee is indicating that he has taken them as a formal representation.

Chris Bryant indicated assent.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for agreeing to the statement later this afternoon on affairs in Northern Ireland. The Leader of the House will know—I have already spoken to him—that events in Northern Ireland are teetering on the brink: we are not months, weeks or days but moments away from the collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive. That is of course very sad, but it is entirely predictable and has been predicted from those on the Democratic Unionist party Benches for the past 13 months.

Will the Leader of the House assure us that good governance and good practices will be put in place to ensure that Northern Ireland does not fall behind in any of its governmental matters; that more time will be set aside in this House to debate issues to do with and pertinent to Northern Ireland; that the daily affairs of Northern Ireland will not be set to the side in any way; that the British Government will take full and proper charge of affairs when and where they have to; that people from the Republic of Ireland and their Government will not be allowed to interfere in the internal mechanisms and affairs of Northern Ireland; and that the frictions that exist between GB trade and Northern Ireland—

Mr Speaker: Order. You will be coming in later! I call the Leader of the House.

Mr Rees-Mogg: It would be wrong of me to predict what is happening in Northern Ireland at the moment. We have to wait upon events, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the British Government take responsibility for the whole of the United Kingdom. It is one single and undivided United Kingdom, and Her Majesty's Government have a responsibility for the best interests of the whole of our country. We recognise the serious difficulties that are being caused by the Northern Ireland protocol and its implementation, and the effect that it has had on Northern Ireland. Her Majesty's Government are aware of the issues, but we are a Unionist Government who attach great importance to being part of the United Kingdom.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Last Sunday I marched with thousands of Derby County fans to Pride Park stadium to show support for Derby County football club, one of the football league's founding members. Derby County football club's administrators have agreed another month's extension with the English Football League, temporarily staving off the threat of expulsion and liquidation. Every day is crucial, and I do not want to see us approach that deadline without a sale of the club having been agreed. Could we have a statement next week to update MPs on the issue, and in particular on how fans' interests are being represented in these important negotiations?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this to the attention of the House again. She has already had an urgent question, and this is a reminder of how effective the procedures of the House can be in highlighting important local issues and what a fantastic champion she is for Derby County. I am not a football expert, as she knows. However, I can tell her that the Minister for Sport, the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), and officials in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport are in regular contact with the English Football League and the administrators about the club's future. Ultimately it is for the EFL, the administrators and the club to resolve the issues, to ensure the survival of Derby County football club, but the Government have urged pragmatism from all parties to find a solution for the benefit of the fans and the community that the club serves. It is positive that the EFL has granted Derby County a four-week extension. That is a vital lifeline for the survival of the club, and the opportunity must be utilised to ensure that a suitable outcome is reached with the interests of Derby County's fans in mind. Offering a debate may be difficult, however, because I have a feeling that my right hon. Friend the Chief Whip might not necessarily be a fan of Derby County, as it is a competitor football club to the one he follows. However, there are DCMS questions next week.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I want to thank the Leader of the House—surprisingly—for writing to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to try to secure a debate on the Government's unlawful disability strategy. Will he commit to keeping us updated at business questions on the progress he is making on securing this important debate in Government time?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her kind words. I take very seriously the points raised in business questions and I pass on all points to the relevant Secretaries of State every week after business questions to ensure that other members of the Government are kept informed of the issues of concern to the House. On the disability strategy, the Government are committed to a strategy that supports all areas of life and to taking action to create a society that works for everyone, so that we can build back better and fairer. It is important to note that the recent judgment did not quash the national disability strategy; it was made on technical grounds. The Government are very much committed to the strategy, which is one of the broadest packages of real practical action so far put together. I will, of

course, mention further that the hon. Lady has asked for a debate, and it may be that the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee has some capacity.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I was shocked last week when the Leader of the House told us that he felt the Government were drifting towards a presidential style of government, rather than a parliamentary one. I draw his attention to the fact that yesterday I published my private Member's Bill, the Prime Minister (Accountability to House of Commons) Bill. I understand that tomorrow might be oversubscribed, so I have decided not to move it tomorrow, but perhaps the Leader of the House could deal with this particular point. I am requesting that we have Prime Minister's questions on a Tuesday and Thursday again, so that the Prime Minister is here twice. It will make Thursday a more important day and it will stop his officials sending him on silly photoshoots on days when he should be in this House. Would the Leader of the House like to support my Bill?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am so sorry to hear that my hon. Friend is not proceeding with his Bill tomorrow, because I was going to be here to respond to it had we reached that stage of the debate. Sadly, the pearls of wisdom that I was looking forward to spewing forth will not be available. None the less, he makes an interesting point about whether PMQs was better on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I think, by and large, that the House likes having the longer time that is available on a Wednesday, but, obviously, the decision on when questions are taken is for the Government, and we listen to hon. and right hon. Members' views.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): There can be few things more valuable to us than the air that we breathe and how clean it is. In my constituency of Edinburgh West, we have a particular problem with two of the worst polluted roads in Scotland. It is why I currently have a private Member's Bill, which will be heard shortly. Will the Leader of the House consider having a debate on how we, across the United Kingdom, reach the World Health Organisation guidelines on clean air and on setting up some mechanism whereby the Government here in Westminster can work with the devolved authorities to ensure that we have a national strategy—or perhaps he would like to support my Bill?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Clean air is very important for the whole of the United Kingdom and it is something that the Government are very committed to improving. As I have said in the House previously, it does seem to me that one of the great scandals of modern politics was the promotion of diesel engines and the nitrous oxides that they spew out, which was done by the last Labour Government in cahoots with the European Union and German car manufacturers, which has had a terrible effect on air quality in our major cities. None the less, the Government are very committed to promoting air quality. As for an immediate debate, I once again point the hon. Lady to the Backbench Business Committee.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. Friend is a great champion for us Back Benchers in getting information from Government Departments. Can he arrange for the Home Secretary, or a Minister from the Home Office, to come forward and give us a

statement about what is happening to immigration correspondence? I received a plethora of emails this week. I shall quote from one of them, but they are all the same.

“Thank you for your emails of 30 November 2020, 8 January 2021, 5 February 2021, 5 March 2021, 7 April 2021, 10 May 2021, 7 June 2021, 6 July 2021, 5 August 2021, 3 September 2021, 30 September 2021, 3 November 2021 and 1 December 2021... We apologise for the delay in replying to your correspondence.”

I will not quote all the letter because of time, but it goes on to say that it hopes to resolve this claim, which by the way was submitted in 2019, by September 2022. That is three years and three months for an individual awaiting on an asylum claim. Can we have a statement on what is happening about this, because it is unacceptable behaviour by the Home Office?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It will not surprise my hon. Friend that I will make no attempt to defend that type of delay. Members have a constitutional right to hold the Government to account and to get proper, full and swift answers. To get a recent reply to a letter dated 30 November 2020 is not a proper constitutional service. I assure my hon. Friend that I will take this up with the Home Office immediately after Business questions. None the less, I do think that getting people back to work in their offices will be tremendously important in clearing up this backlog, because working from home has had all sorts of unintended consequences.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Leader of the House is right: we have our own opinions, but we cannot have our own facts. Facts are facts. One fact is that the victims of Jimmy Savile, through their solicitor, have made it quite clear that the smear against the Leader of the Opposition is groundless and should be withdrawn. This is a new low for the Conservative party. What makes Conservative Members think that they know better than the victims of Jimmy Savile?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman must ask the Leader of the Opposition why he gave an apology.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): With respect to the restoration and renewal of Parliament, I welcome yesterday's announcement by the Commission, chaired by the Leader of the House, that it will take back control from the sponsor body and that all the figures that come out of the delivery authority and the sponsor body, on which I sit, should be published. Can he confirm that the figures for the delay, length and cost of decant are truly horrendous; that no work would be scheduled to start before 2027, although the building works need to be got on with now; and that we are talking of a decant in excess of 15 years and costs in excess of £14 billion? Will he therefore confirm that some of us have been proved right when we said that we should have got on with it years ago? Can we have an early resolution of the House so that we can resolve the matter, take back control and start the work now?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend raises some very important points. The Commission has asked that the figures be made available to all Members as soon as possible. The figures now range from £7 billion to £13 billion for the cost and from 12 years to 20 years for the decant. It seems to me that if we were to have a

decant of 20 years, we would never come back to this Palace and that £13 billion or possibly even £14 billion of taxpayers' money is not justifiable.

My right hon. Friend is also right that it has gone on for too long. We have been waiting for years for the perfect scheme instead of getting on with what we ought to do. He says it would be 2027 at the earliest, which is correct in part, but realistically it would probably be 2031, because the northern estate would have to be ready for people to move into it. I am glad to say that, with much thanks to your leadership of the Commission, Mr Speaker, we have been getting on with things before restoration and renewal that have been taken out of the scheme.

The Elizabeth tower is emerging butterfly-like from its chrysalis day by day to reveal an exceptionally beautiful part of the Palace. The fire safety programme has been proceeded with, so there are 4,126 sprinkler heads and 8 miles of pipe that are an important part of protecting life in the event of fire and are some protection for fire suppression that would be beneficial to the building.

By and large, the cast iron roofs have been restored in a very big programme as it is thought to be the largest expanse of cast iron roof in Europe. We are also getting on with the northern estate. It is really important that we get on with things and do them at a proportionate cost. We cannot possibly be out of here for 20 years; I do not think any Member thinks that is reasonable.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I put on record my role as chair of the Threehills Community Supermarket, which will be Scotland's first community supermarket. It opened its larger last week and the feedback has been positive. People using the service are on low wages or benefits. Will the Leader of the House undertake to place in the Commons Library a copy of the Government's evidenced review of the systematic drivers of the need for food aid, which was due to be published by the Department for Work and Pensions 18 months ago, so we can facilitate an open and transparent debate on the serious matter of food aid provision?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I congratulate the Threehills Community Supermarket in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and him on the work that he has clearly done to support it? The issue relates to the cost of living and what we have been doing to help people with their livelihoods, for which the rise in the national living wage to £9.50 in April, which will leave a full-time worker £5,000 a year better off, and the cut to the universal credit taper and the increased work allowance, which will give 2 million families an extra £1,000 a year in their earnings, are of fundamental importance. On the report that he is asking for, I will take that up with the Department.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): I am sure that you appreciate, Mr Speaker, that the British Lawnmower Museum in Southport is a real jewel in the nation's heritage crown—indeed, a cut above the rest. It is under threat, however, from Labour-controlled Sefton Council and Sustrans, which are trying to impose a liveable neighbourhood near the museum that would seriously inhibit access, particularly for elderly people and disabled people. Could we have a debate on accessing our great British heritage sites? If my right hon. Friend or you, Mr Speaker, want to donate a lawnmower to the museum, it would be gratefully received.

Mr Speaker: I must declare that I have been to the museum.

Mr Rees-Mogg: It must be a very great place if it has been honoured by a visit from Mr Speaker himself. It is one of the glories of our country that we have museums for almost everything. A lawnmower museum is a reminder of the pride that we take in having finely cut lawns. It is worth bearing in mind that until, I think, the 1860s, the cricket ground at Lord's—Thomas Lord's ground—was cut by sheep. It is therefore relatively recently that lawnmowers have been used to assist the tending of Lord's cricket ground.

Socialist councils are an absolute menace. We know that Sefton Council is a particular menace to all good ideas locally. It is absolutely typical that it is trying to stop something that gives pleasure to people. I am glad to say that £850 million of taxpayer spending was announced in last year's spending review to support world-class cultural and heritage buildings. We should take pride in and support our local museums, and—dare I say it—we should cut socialist councils down to size.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am sure that the Leader of the House will be delighted to know that, following a campaign by the women's parliamentary Labour party, the journalist Rose Stokes and the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, Boots has announced that it is slashing the price of its morning-after pill from £15.99 to £10.99, removing the sexist surcharge that is attached to that medication. It is interesting to note that Superdrug is still charging £13.49, whereas people can get generic emergency contraception for £3.99 on the Chemist4U website. I am raising this because cuts to public health budgets and the fragmentation of the NHS have meant that it is more difficult for women to access contraception advice. May we have a debate about the report of the all-party parliamentary group on sexual and reproductive health in the UK, which made clear recommendations on proper funding and accessibility for women's contraceptive health services?

Mr Speaker: Before the Leader of the House answers, may I just say that we are finishing at 11.30? If we want to get people in, we are really going to have to speed up both questions and answers.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The right hon. Lady cannot expect me to speak in favour of abortifacients.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): The levelling-up White Paper that was launched yesterday will see Stoke-on-Trent become an educational investment area and get multi-million pound funding to bus back better, adding to the £56 million from the levelling-up fund, the £17.6 million Kidsgrove town deal, the £29 million transforming cities fund and the 550 new jobs from the Home Office. There are also the powers to compel rogue and absent landlords of high street shops to fill them and to increase fines when heritage and history is allowed to rot. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Burslem and Tunstall, which he has visited, deserve a future high streets taskforce?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I did indeed visit. I got to try some of Margaret's famous vanilla custards at the Tunstall indoor market and she gave me supplies to eat on the train back to London. Stoke-on-Trent already receives support

from the Government's high streets taskforce, which announced its first tranche of bespoke expert support last year. It is staggering the delivery of its expert support to a total of 152 selected local authorities over the period 2021-24, but my hon. Friend is a brilliant campaigner for any cakes that are available.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Can we have a debate on banning rapists from football? This week, Scottish club Raith Rovers signed David Goodwillie, who was found to be a rapist by one of the most senior judges in Scotland in a civil court. The club has just reversed its decision, but it has caused huge trauma, upset and a devastating impact on the football community that supports Raith Rovers, including the women's team, now renamed the McDermid Ladies, who will play on Sunday at 2 o'clock. Does the Leader of the House agree that rapists have no place in professional football, or any football, or any role in public life?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Of course I agree with the hon. Lady. She is right to raise a matter of this importance in the House.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I would like to associate myself with the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). When it comes to restoration and renewal, we should prioritise taxpayer value for money. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the works could be done more cost-effectively and to a perfectly decent specification, without the bells and whistles currently planned? Does he agree with me and my constituents that we should pursue this path?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes. The Commission was told that we could define how to meet lesser requirements at a fraction of the cost of the essential scheme. It has got far too expensive, it is taking far too long and we need to get on with doing what really needs to be done and to prioritise taxpayer value.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Public houses are an essential part of the fabric of the community up and down the country. However, I hear not just from my city of Cambridge but elsewhere that not only did they have a tough pandemic but they face a difficult challenge with food inspections that have become more complicated, with less experienced inspectors and extra costs. Could a Minister please address this issue? Perhaps the Leader of the House will note that it is the socialists who know the problems of business.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes; I am delighted. As I have said before, there is more joy in heaven over the one sinner who repenteth than the 99 who are not repenting. The hon. Gentleman is always right to seek redress from over-zealous regulators who do not do their job properly. I will pass on what he has said to the relevant Department.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): My constituent David Bosley contacted me last month about his son Alex, who is one of a number of my constituents to have had their Instagram account hacked and used by fraudsters to trick their contacts into giving them money. The fraudsters often walk away with tens of thousands of pounds. May we have a debate on clamping down

both on the perpetrators of the frauds and on the lax processes of the social media platforms that inadvertently facilitate fraud?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is so right to raise this important and concerning issue, which will be of importance to Members across the House. The Online Safety Bill will ensure that big platforms, including Instagram, will have to do a great deal more to take scams seriously and keep people safe. If firms fail to keep people safe, Ofcom will be able to give huge fines of up to multi-billions of pounds for the largest companies, or even block sites. We are carefully considering the recommendations of the Joint Committee on the draft Online Safety Bill at the moment and will incorporate them where we feel that the Bill can be strengthened further. I can assure my hon. Friend that work is under way.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the work that he does on following up answers to parliamentary questions that are of low quality. May I—surprisingly perhaps—praise one that I have received from the Department of Health and Social Care? I asked different Departments what their policy was on references for recruitment. Not only did the DHSC answer my question but it helpfully included the Cabinet Office round-robin guidance to all the Departments on lines to take in answering my question, including a section explaining my motivation in asking the question, which I thought was very useful as I was wondering what it was myself. Could this novel, but perhaps—to use the word of the week—inadvertent, innovation be adopted in all such cases?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As it happens, I have often thought that the greater the openness the more understanding there is from other sides. This inadvertent mistake sounds to have been rather beneficial.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): The independent inquiry into child sexual abuse reported its conclusions this week and made a number of findings about failings of police and local councils to protect vulnerable children. The report describes a horrific culture that forced survivors of child sexual exploitation to fight to be believed. Those who were heard were made to feel as if they had brought the exploitation on themselves. Investigations were hampered by poor data collection on a range of issues, including the ethnicity of perpetrators. Please can we find Government time for a debate on this issue, which affects so many communities across the country, including in Rother Valley?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work that he has been doing on this particularly important issue. The Government are committed to considering carefully the inquiry's recommendations and will respond fully within the inquiry's deadline of six months. Obviously, I cannot comment on the recommendations at this stage, but the Government are delivering the action set out in our groundbreaking tackling child sexual abuse strategy, which sets out our whole-system response to tackling sexual abuse, including exploitation. The Government will shortly publish an updated child exploitation disruption toolkit to help the police and local authorities to prevent and disrupt organised

exploitation. It is likely that there will be an opportunity for Members to discuss the work of the IICSA when it publishes its final report later this year.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): During COP26 the Women's Institute distributed crocheted bangles like the one I am wearing—a bracelet made by Jean Boyle of Flockton WI—to remind decision makers that there should be no more loopholes in carbon emission reduction targets. May we have a debate on how decisions made at COP26 will be monitored and held to account later this year at COP27?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I congratulate the WI on its terrific work. It makes not only marmalade but items for the hon. Gentleman to wear. Of course there will be regular discussions on COP26, and we will be held to account in this House through Adjournment debates, Backbench Business debates and, indeed, questions to the COP26 President.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Yesterday I met Fran Hall and Lobby Akinola, representatives of Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice. They are very angry that the covid inquiry is being delayed, and they want to know when it will be launched so that the evidence is contained and made secure, and so the hearings can go ahead in the spring, as has been promised. If there are more delays, the covid inquiry will be kicked into the summer or later. The inquiry needs to start in the spring. Can we have a statement from the Government on the covid-19 inquiry and when it will start?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think preliminary work is beginning and, as I understand it, the website was opened yesterday. I will confirm this to the hon. Lady, but it is happening. The inquiry will go ahead, and it is very important that it goes ahead when all the facts are known.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): We had the very positive levelling-up statement and White Paper yesterday, but please can we have a debate on one element of levelling up that is urgent and specific enough to merit direct consideration, and that is the role of education, skills and colleges? The lack of skills or access to a skilled workforce is the issue most raised with me by local businesses.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I agree with my hon. Friend that education and skills have a vital role to play in levelling up the country. Like him, I welcome yesterday's announcement of the White Paper by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Through our multibillion pound plan for jobs, we have seen 120,000 young people starting their kickstart job and more than 160,000 apprentices being supported through the apprenticeship incentive scheme. There is a £3.8 billion increase in skills spending, and we are funding a lifetime guarantee and quadrupling places on skills bootcamps. As announced by the Secretary of State yesterday, the Government's mission is to target new high-quality skills training at the lowest-skilled areas, with 200,000 more people completing high-quality skills training annually. What my hon. Friend is calling for is in the pipeline.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House make time for the Minister for Defence People and Veterans to make even a written statement on the progress he is making on ensuring that the veterans card is issued to former service personnel who served before 2018? I have been asking for an update from the Minister, his predecessor and his predecessor's predecessor since the card was announced. It would be good to understand what the delays are and why the Government are not willing to issue this much-needed card for veterans.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I commit to the hon. Gentleman that, in my regular correspondence with Ministers after business questions, I will take this up with the Minister for Defence People and Veterans and get an answer.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Unlike the Leader of the House, I will never have enough money to own an Aston Martin, but I have a constituent who is lucky enough to own one. It was repaired after being flood damaged. He drove it safely in Cyprus for four years, he has insurance and he has an MOT showing it is road-worthy, but the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency will not allow him to register the car to be driven on the road because, according to its database, it was written off and due to be scrapped by a previous insurance company. I have tried to assist my constituent, but the DVLA has more or less told me to go away with a capital F. Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Transport to have a look at this and see how the DVLA makes decisions and to whom it is accountable?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Sadly, I do not have an Aston Martin, although I think they are particularly beautiful and elegant cars. His constituent therefore has my greatest sympathy as he finds this bureaucratic morass is stopping him registering his car and being able to use it when it is now in working condition and with an MOT.

The DVLA has been a mainstay of problems for Members of Parliament in recent weeks. I was told that the backlog had been sorted, but I am afraid that is not the experience of my constituents. I will definitely take this up for the hon. Gentleman's constituent with the Secretary of State for Transport.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am always pleased to listen to the Leader of the House, but I like it better when he seems to be speaking for the House of Commons rather than as a sort of public relations man for the Prime Minister. He said some very thoughtful things when he talked about the Metropolitan police and police behaviour, about how a few rotten apples can make such a difference in an institution's culture. I hope he will reflect on what he said and apply it to what has been going on in this House of Commons and in this Government. While he is thinking about that, can we have an early debate on the campaign that my great old friend, my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), has been raising in this House with no response: why is it that so much Russian money is swilling around in London? It is in the Conservative party; it is everywhere, to such a level that we are now told we cannot have sanctions against the Russians because there is so much Russian money laundering in this city.

Mr Rees-Mogg: First of all, this Government is made up of a collection of the finest, best apples that has ever been seen anywhere in the world. They are the Beauty of Bath, the Cox's Orange Pippins—the best and finest that a costermonger could ever have on his stall.

To come to the point about Russian money, as I said earlier, should a further Russian incursion into Ukraine happen, allies must enact swift, retributive responses, including unprecedented sanctions. We have very tough laws against dirty money, and they are enforced.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I know that the Leader of the House places great importance on the honesty and integrity of Members. More than two years ago, during the election campaign, the Prime Minister gave a categorical assurance that members of the mine-workers' pension scheme would receive the moneys back from that pension scheme, so could we now have a statement to tell us when that is going to happen, given the length of time they have had to wait and the importance of this issue for ex-miners in my constituency?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this point on behalf of his constituents. It has been raised before by other Members, and I have been following it up with the relevant Department.

Economic Update

11.31 am

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): The UK's economic recovery has been quicker and stronger than forecast. In the depths of the pandemic, our economy was expected to return to its pre-crisis level at the end of 2022; instead, it got there in November 2021, a full year earlier. Unemployment was expected to peak at nearly 12%; instead, it peaked at 5.2% and has now fallen to just over 4%, saving more than 2 million jobs. With the fastest-growing economy in the G7 this year, with over 400,000 more people on payrolls than before the pandemic, and with business investment rising, it is no wonder that borrowing is set to fall from £320 billion last year—the highest ever peacetime level—to just £46 billion by the end of this Parliament. As we emerge from the depths of the worst recession in 300 years, we should be proud of our economic record. The economy is stronger because of the plan we put in place, because of the actions we took to protect families and businesses, and that plan is working.

However, for all the progress we are making, the job is not yet done. I know that right now, the No. 1 issue on people's minds is the rising cost of living. It is the independent Bank of England's role to deliver low and stable inflation, and the Governor will set out its judgments at midday today. Just as the Government stood behind the British people through the pandemic, so we will help people deal with one of the biggest costs they now face: energy. The energy regulator Ofgem announced this morning that the energy price cap will rise in April to £1,971, an increase of £693 for the average household. Without Government action, this would be incredibly tough for millions of hard-working families, so the Government are going to step in to directly help people manage those extra costs.

Before I set out the steps we are taking, let me explain what is happening to energy prices and why. People's energy bills are rising because it is more expensive for the companies that supply our energy to buy oil, coal and gas. Of the £693 increase in the April price cap, around 80% comes from wholesale energy prices. Over the past year, the price of gas alone has quadrupled, and because over 85% of homes in Britain are heated with a gas boiler and around 40% of our electricity comes from gas, this is hitting households hard. The reasons gas prices are soaring are global: across Europe and Asia, a long, cold winter last year depleted gas stores. Disruption to other energy sources, such as nuclear and wind, left us relying more than usual on gas during the summer months. Surging demand in the world's manufacturing centres in Asia, at the same time that countries such as China are moving away from coal, is further increasing demand for gas, and concerns about a possible Russian incursion into Ukraine are putting further pressure on wholesale gas markets. So prices are rising.

The price cap has meant that the impact of soaring gas prices has so far fallen predominantly on energy companies—so much so that some suppliers that could not afford to meet those extra costs have gone out of business as a result. It is not sustainable to keep holding the price of energy artificially low. For me to stand here and pretend we do not have to adjust to paying higher

prices would be wrong and dishonest, but what we can do is take the sting out of a significant price shock for millions of families by making sure that the increase in prices is smaller initially and is spread over a longer period.

Without Government intervention, the increase in the price cap would leave the average household having to find an extra £693. The actions I am announcing today will provide, to the vast majority of households, just over half of that amount—£350. In total, the Government are going to help about 28 million households this year. Taken together, this is a plan to help with the cost of living worth about £9 billion.

We are delivering that support in three different ways. First, we will spread the worst of the extra costs of this year's energy price shock over time. This year, all domestic electricity customers will receive an up-front discount on their bills worth £200. Energy suppliers will apply the discount on people's bills from October, with the Government meeting the cost in full. That discount will automatically be repaid from people's bills in equal £40 instalments over the next five years. This is the right way to support people while staying on track with our plans to repair the public finances.

Because we are taking a fiscally responsible approach, we can also provide more help faster to those who need it most—the second part of our plan. We are going to give people a £150 council tax rebate to help with the cost of energy in April, and this discount will not need to be repaid. I do want to be clear with the House that we are deliberately not just giving support to people on benefits. Lots of people on middle incomes are struggling right now too, so we have decided to provide the council tax rebate to households in bands A to D. This means that about 80% of all homes in England will benefit.

The third part of our plan will provide local authorities with a discretionary fund of nearly £150 million to help those lower-income households who happen to live in higher council tax properties, and households in bands A to D who are exempt from council tax at all.

We are also confirming today that we will go ahead with existing plans to expand eligibility for the warm home discount by almost a third, so that 3 million vulnerable households will now benefit from that scheme. That is not all we are doing to help vulnerable households. We are providing £3 billion over this Parliament to help more than half a million lower-income homes become more energy efficient, saving them on average £290 a year; increasing the national living wage to £9.50 an hour in April—a rise of over £1,000 for 2 million low-paid workers; and providing an effective tax cut for those on universal credit, allowing almost 2 million households to keep an average of £1,000 per year.

The payment through energy suppliers will apply across England, Wales and Scotland. Energy policy is devolved in Northern Ireland, with a different regulator, and the Government do not have the legal powers to intervene, but we will make sure that the Executive are funded to do something similar, with about £150 million for Northern Ireland through the Barnett formula next year. Because the council tax system is England-only, total Barnett consequential of about £565 million will be provided to the devolved Administrations in the usual way.

I know that some in this House have argued for a cut in VAT on energy. However, that policy would disproportionately benefit wealthier households. There

[Rishi Sunak]

would be no guarantee that suppliers would pass on the discounts to all customers, and we should be honest with ourselves: this would become a permanent Government subsidy on everyone's bills, a permanent subsidy worth £2.5 billion every year, at a time when we are trying to rebuild the public finances. Instead, our plan allows us to provide more generous support, faster, for those who need it most, providing 28 million households with at least £200, and the vast majority receiving £350. It is fair, it is targeted, it is proportionate: it is the right way to help people with a spike in energy costs.

Today's announcements are just one part of the Government's plan to tackle the country's most pressing economic challenges. It is a plan for growth, with record investment in infrastructure, innovation and skills; a plan to restore the public finances, with debt falling by the end of this Parliament; a plan to cut waiting lists and back the NHS with £29 billion over three years, and with a permanent new source of funding; and, with the measures that I have announced today, a plan to help with the rising cost of energy, with £350 more in the pockets of tens of millions of hard-working families. That is our plan to build a stronger economy, not just today but for the long term, and I commend it to the House.

11.41 am

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I thank the Chancellor for his statement.

We have known that this price rise was coming for months, and today we learn that the energy price cap will increase to £1,971 in April. In October, I called on the Government to provide immediate support for support for households, cutting VAT on their energy bills and saving £200, with £400 in extra targeted support for those who need it most, which would mean, for some of the poorest families in our country, almost no increase in energy bills from April. The Government have not done that today.

We all remember when the Prime Minister said that cutting VAT on energy bills was one of the benefits of Brexit. He said:

"When we Vote Leave, we will be able to scrap this unfair and damaging tax."

Could there ever be a time when that policy is needed more than it is today? I should have thought that the Prime Minister, with his unblemished record of integrity, would defend the commitments he had made, but instead, that is another pledge thrown on to the bonfire of broken Tory promises.

The uncomfortable truth for the Chancellor is that even after what he has announced today, families in Britain—including some of the poorest—will still be paying hundreds of pounds more for their energy from April as a result of the breathtaking rise in energy prices just announced by Ofgem. Millions of people will be cutting back to pay the bills. Citizens Advice says that it saw a record number of people in January struggling with fuel debts, before the energy price increase. But what do the Government offer? A buy now, pay later scheme that loads up costs for tomorrow; high prices as far as the eye can see, this

year, next year, and the year after that. It is a case of give with one hand now, and take it all back later with the other.

The Conservative party used to talk about the nation's credit card. Today, we have seen the Chancellor force British households to load up their credit cards. By lending billions of pounds to energy companies, he is gambling that prices are going to fall, but they could go up further in October. What then? Billions more loaded on to people's bills? The best way of targeting support to those who need it most would be an increase to £400 and an extension to 9 million households of the warm home discount, as Labour has proposed. The Government's scheme is a pale imitation of Labour's, especially for the households and pensioners on the most modest incomes, but the Chancellor is using council tax to target extra help. That will mean that many of the poorest households receive no extra support, while some of the richest do, and it is people living in the north and the midlands who will lose out most. The hypocrisy, the day after the publication of the Government's levelling-up White Paper, is obvious. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Holden, I think we need to be a little calmer. I am sure you will want to catch my eye, and that is not the way to do so.

Rachel Reeves: Can the Chancellor confirm how many people who are fuel-poor will miss out on council tax support compared with the warm home discount support that Labour has announced?

The Government had a choice. Only today, Shell announced that its profits have quadrupled to \$20 billion. It described its results as "momentous"—dividends up, profits up, and people's energy bills up too. Labour's plan would impose a one-off windfall tax on those excess profits, but this Chancellor would rather shield the oil and gas producers while at the same time loading the cost on to working people and pensioners. Cabinet Ministers have described the oil and gas producers as "struggling". Tell that to the one in five people who are already skipping meals so they can pay their energy bills.

This energy crisis has not happened overnight. A decade of dither and delay from the Conservative party has brought us to this point: a decade of failure to regulate our energy markets; a decade in which they have slashed our gas storage capacity, leaving us more reliant than ever on Russia for our gas imports; a decade of failure to make the most of solar, tidal and wind energy; and a decade of stalled progress on insulating our homes to keep bills low, not just for one year but into the future. It has been the Tory decade that has led to this announcement of the biggest increase in the price of domestic energy since records began. That is what the Chancellor should acknowledge and apologise for today. The Conservatives are not solving the cost of living crisis, because the Conservatives are the cost of living crisis.

Rishi Sunak: The Opposition may have some soundbites but they certainly do not have a policy. [Interruption.] In contrast, this Government have announced measures— [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Seely, is there something wrong with that wood you keep knocking, because I think it is in good order? You do not need to test for woodworm.

Rishi Sunak: In contrast, this Government have announced measures to share the burden with consumers and help manage the global price rise. Despite the faux outrage from the Opposition Benches, I am sure that even they would admit privately that the support just announced is both generous and comprehensive.

Let me take some of the hon. Lady's points in turn. First, on VAT, may I say how very welcome it is that the Opposition are recognising the benefits of Brexit? I hope they will join me in celebrating the fact that we have been able to change mass migration to this country after decades, that we can create new freeports in places such as Teesside, that we can sign new free trade deals, and that we can deregulate our economy to drive faster growth. She talked about VAT. VAT will, on average, be worth £90 to every household. We are providing £150 to those households that really need it and delivering that support quicker.

Secondly, the hon. Lady tried to claim that it was the Government's responsibility to manage global gas prices. I outlined in my statement that it is very clear, as any person looking at this sensibly will acknowledge, that global factors are causing the increase in gas prices. No British Government or Chancellor can change what is happening in Asia or, indeed, stop a nuclear power plant going offline in Germany, and the hon. Lady should acknowledge that. Even in places such as Norway, electricity bills are rising because global factors are in play. She would do well to acknowledge that—and the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), sitting next to her, will know that, having spent a lot of time on this.

Thirdly, I want to address the point about our support for the most vulnerable, because I am proud of this Government's record in supporting those who need our help. The policies we have announced today are progressive in their nature. A flat rate will, of course, mean far more to those on lower incomes or with lower energy bills. It is worth five times as much as a percentage of income for those on the lowest incomes as for those on the highest incomes. The hon. Lady talked about insulation. Over this Parliament, we are spending £3 billion to improve energy efficiency and insulation for over half a million households in fuel poverty. That is the right thing to do and it will save those vulnerable families, on average, £300 a year, not just this year but every year going forward. We have already announced those plans.

Lastly, to address the hon. Lady's point on a windfall tax, of course that sounds superficially appealing, but we on the Government Benches deal with complex problems in a responsible way. The obvious impact of a windfall tax would be to deter investment—it is as simple as that. At this moment I want to see more investment in the North sea, not less. Last year we saw the lowest amount of investment on record in the North sea, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy pointed out just the other day. There are £11 billion of projects lined up to go. I want to unlock that investment because that is good for this country, good for British jobs and good for our energy security.

We will pursue policies that are good for the interests of this country not just today but in the future. My right hon. Friend the Energy Secretary is working very hard to make sure we have an energy market that is fit for the future. We have made investments in nuclear, which, as he rightly pointed out, were ignored by the Labour party when it was in power, but which we are now fixing.

In conclusion, I am not blind to the challenges we face. I have to say to the hon. Lady and her colleagues, however, that we on this side of the House did not have the luxury of sitting on the sidelines and throwing stones. Faced with the gravest of crises, this Government chose to protect millions of jobs. We chose to support millions of businesses, we chose to invest in a world-leading vaccination programme, and we chose a balanced approach to covid so we could open up faster than anywhere else in Europe. We did those things at record speed and at a time of great uncertainty, and we will always strive to learn from mistakes. Nothing is ever perfect when responding to a crisis, but I say to the Labour party that there is a fine line between reasonable criticism and political opportunism, and in my experience the British people can always tell the difference.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement today. Does he agree that a cut in VAT to solve this crisis is a completely flawed policy, as evidenced by the three economists who spoke to the Treasury Committee this week, including Torsten Bell from the Resolution Foundation, who wanted something far more targeted, such as what my right hon. Friend has announced today? It is clear that one factor in this crisis is Russia's willingness to weaponise its gas supplies. Will he confirm that if there is any incursion into Ukraine, this country, with our international allies, will look at weaponising our banking system, which would be economically catastrophic for Russia?

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. On VAT, I have nothing further to add. He is right; what we are doing is more targeted, faster and more generous to those who need our help. With regard to sanctions on Russia, I can assure him that absolutely nothing is off the table. We are working closely with our international partners, as the Foreign Secretary has outlined, to prepare a very robust package of sanctions.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Chancellor brags about having the fastest recovery, but that is actually wrong because Italy, for a start, has a higher growth rate. If the economy is doing so well, why is he still introducing a £12 billion tax on workers this financial year? Why has it taken to the last minute to try to do something about the cost of living crisis? Why is so much of this measure actually a loan that bill payers will have to pay back? He talks about not doing a VAT cut because he wants a more targeted approach. How is giving everybody a rebate a targeted approach? It is illogical.

The reality is that the Treasury is currently raking it in compared with where it thought it would be in the March 2021 Budget: an extra £3 billion this financial year and next year from oil and gas revenues; and VAT receipt predictions in October last year were nearly £40 billion higher than what they were in March 2021. That is a lot of money that the Treasury could be freeing up. Meanwhile, average energy bills increased

[Alan Brown]

this year to nearly £1,200, up from £700 the year before, bringing in an extra £0.6 billion in VAT. The VAT increase due to the cap rise will bring the Treasury another £0.8 billion a year, so there is much more money it could free up.

The Scottish Government are bringing in a £20-a-week child payment and uprating the child winter assistance payment. Could the Chancellor not look at doing something similar? Will he confirm that the council tax rebate proposal he is bringing in will have Barnett consequential, how much they will be and that they will go to the Scottish Government? Will he look at devolving further budgets and powers so that Scotland can take a more targeted approach?

National Energy Action estimated that increasing the cap would put 6 million people into fuel poverty. With the Chancellor's measures, what impact assessment have the Government done of how many households will be in fuel poverty? How many more premature deaths will there be because people are in fuel poverty? Lastly, the highlands of Scotland generate electricity and send it to the rest of the UK, yet electricity users in the highlands on the restricted meters pay 4p a unit more for electricity, or £400 more on their bills. When will the Treasury and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy work with Ofgem to remove that ridiculous surcharge for ageing people in the highlands?

Rishi Sunak: I am happy to confirm to the hon. Gentleman that the Barnett consequential for Scotland will be around £290 million, which I hope he will welcome. My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury will be speaking to Kate Forbes later today to go over the details, and I very much hope that the Scottish Government will choose to do something very similar to what we are doing, to the benefit of Scottish citizens. Of course, Scottish citizens will benefit from the rebate scheme on bills, because that is a Great Britain-wide policy, as I outlined.

With regard to the hon. Gentleman's broader points on the North sea, there is a clear point of difference between us on the Government side of the House and the SNP. We believe in the future of the North sea, in the oil and gas industry, and in the 200,000 jobs it supports, and we want to ensure it plays an important part in our transition to net zero. I hope he can see that that is the right thing for Scotland and will join us in supporting that very important industry.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his excellent statement, and particularly for the thoughtful and progressive nature of the actions he plans to take. Does he agree that it is right to help not only the poorest, but those on middle incomes who are struggling with their household budgets?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; I know that is something she is perhaps bringing up on behalf of her constituents. A price increase of this magnitude impacts almost everybody, and it is right that our response therefore helps almost everybody. That is what we are doing: ensuring that those families who are working hard on household incomes of £40,000 or so will still get £150-worth of support. Four out of

every five households will benefit. We are on the side of hardworking families like those, and I make no apology for it.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I see we now have the Klarna Chancellor—"Get it now, pay later." There is an important issue with council tax: in areas such as mine and other parts of London, there are not many people in those bands, and certainly not in bands A to C. Who will fund the council tax rebate? Will it be fully funded by the Exchequer, and will there be a weighting of the £150 million fund to areas such as mine, where there are poor households in high-value properties?

Rishi Sunak: Just to confirm for the hon. Lady, it is council tax bands A to D, so it is four out of every five households across England. Obviously, that will vary by region. I can confirm that it will be fully Exchequer-funded and, on top of that, there will be a discretionary fund of around £150 million, for which the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will decide the best allocation formula. Local authorities will be able to use that to help those low-income households that happen to live in higher council tax band properties and those people, such as students, who are exempt from paying council tax at all, but whom we would want to get that support to.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Conservatives believe in holding taxes down and putting more money in people's pockets so that they can decide how to spend it. Socialists believe in raising taxes and then choosing to give it back, in the form of discounts and rebates, to selected people who the Government think need them. Could the Chancellor explain his approach in increasing national insurance contributions and then handing money back to different people through rebates and discounts? Is that a Conservative approach, or is it a socialist approach?

Rishi Sunak: With the greatest respect to my hon. Friend, I also believe that it is a Conservative approach to be responsible with this nation's public finances. I believe that, after recovering from the worst economic shock in 300 years, where borrowing spiralled to levels that we have not seen since world war two, it is right and responsible to tackle that and get our borrowing and debt down to sustainable levels. That is why I have had to make difficult decisions, but also fund the country's No. 1 priority: the NHS and the unacceptably high and growing number of people waiting for operations. That is what that funding will do. It is right that we provide a secure, long-term, sustainable funding stream for the country's No. 1 priority, and people should be reassured that every penny of that levy is going to go to the thing that they care most about.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): There is an obvious unfairness in the massive profits being made by the oil and gas companies at a time when families are facing such great hardship. Surely the Chancellor must make an intervention to address that. He has announced a discretionary fund for local councils. Worried families will have no idea how much that will benefit them, if at all. Will he instead introduce an uplift in universal credit, having cut it so unfairly just four months ago?

Rishi Sunak: It is worth pointing out that the energy companies that the right hon. Gentleman talks about are already subject to a far higher rate of corporation tax. In fact, at 40% versus 19%, it is double the rate of corporation tax that other companies pay. I will not repeat my earlier arguments about the windfall tax.

We believe that the right way is to make sure that people can keep more of what they earn, which is why we cut the universal credit taper rate by 8 percentage points. That is a £2.2 billion tax cut that will benefit 2 million of the lowest paid people in our society. It is making working pay, it is strengthening incentives to work, it is the right policy and it is a Conservative policy.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Many families across the country will struggle with their energy bills this year, so I am grateful that we have a Chancellor who is in touch with that. Will he commit to continuing to ensure that those in middle Britain, as well as those on the very lowest incomes, are supported by this Government?

Rishi Sunak: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right and I can give her that reassurance. I hope that today's announcements will provide her with the confidence she needs that both I and this Government are committed to being on the side of those hard-working families, whom she does an enormous amount to represent and champion in this House.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The Chancellor said that energy suppliers will apply the discount on people's bills from October. Vauxhall constituents contact me almost daily, including residents who live in properties that are too cold to heat and residents pleading for help to get repairs done. Current data suggests that more than 8,000 households in Vauxhall already live in fuel poverty. What does the Chancellor have to say to my constituents who are already unable to make ends meet and who face a hike of over £700 in their energy bills?

Rishi Sunak: What I can tell them is that they will not have to wait until October, as the Labour party's proposals would have had them do. They will receive £150 in April, and then in October they will receive the rebate on their bills at a time when the energy price cap will be looked at again. So it is appropriate that there is further action to provide support then. That is why this policy is the right policy. By using the council tax system, we can get money to people faster—£150 in April for the hon. Lady's constituents.

Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Con): I welcome this smart set of measures. We must retain fiscal discipline; otherwise the problem will get worse rather than better. On monetary policy, the Chancellor mentioned the independence of the Bank of England decision, which has just been announced, but there is some chatter about working in tandem with the Bank. Will he confirm that, on monetary policy—not just interest-rate setting but the withdrawal of quantitative easing—Bank independence will be respected?

Rishi Sunak: I can give my right hon. Friend that assurance. It is absolutely right and proper that the Bank is independent of Government on matters of monetary

policy. That is exactly what has always been the case over the past two years and it will continue to be the case. I can wholeheartedly give him that assurance.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The Chancellor will be pleased that his campaign team are behind him today. Does he really think that the super-profits of \$20 billion made by Shell are untouchable? His hands-off approach will not persuade many people across our country.

Rishi Sunak: What millions of people across this country will see today is a Government who are on their side and a Government taking action to help them with the anxiety they feel about rising energy bills. We are doing it in a proportionate, fair, targeted and responsible way to protect people not just today, but for years.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): Thousands of families in Swindon and millions of households across the country will welcome the immediate help on council tax that the Chancellor has announced today in his welcome statement. Does he agree that the cod analysis we heard from the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) about the energy market in Europe is demonstrable evidence of the paucity of the Labour party's approach to energy? Is not our approach to a zero-carbon economy—one based upon energy security—going to be the way we deliver our country out of these short-term problems?

Rishi Sunak: As ever, my right hon. and learned Friend makes an excellent point; he is absolutely right and I agree wholeheartedly with him. He will know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is working very hard to undo some of the mistakes that the Labour party made in the past.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I know that the Chancellor is all pumped up, but this is pretty puny stuff, to be honest; £350 is not going to touch the sides of the problem for my constituents. Gas and electricity are up for the average family in my constituency by £686; fuel is up by £314; the average weekly shop is up by £385; universal credit has been cut by £1,040; national insurance is up by £150; and frozen tax allowances—frozen by him—will cost another £300. That makes £2,875, in a constituency where the average wage is £27,000. That is really going to cause hardship and £350 does not even touch it.

Rishi Sunak: The Labour party has proposals that would give considerably less to many people, so it is a bit rich to hear that. The hon. Member had a long list of numbers. I also have one: 400,000 more people on the payroll than there were before the crisis; 2 million jobs saved because of the actions of this Government; the national living wage going up by £1,000 a year in April; and a £1,000 tax cut for millions of people on universal credit. Those things are what we are doing to put more money into people's pockets when they need it, and they can rely on us to continue supporting them not just now, but for days and years into the future.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): First, I thank the Chancellor for coming to the House to make his statement before he does a press conference. That is

[Mr Mark Harper]

the right order of priorities. I also thank him for engaging with Conservative colleagues, listening to their concerns and responding to them in his statement. Finally, may I highlight the realism and honesty with which he has grappled with global gas prices? We cannot pretend that they have not gone up and what he has done is set out a package to smooth the impact for everybody and to help those on the lowest incomes. That is the right approach and it demonstrates why we have got it right and the Labour party is not fit for office.

Rishi Sunak: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Those of us in government make responsible decisions and we are honest with people. I think people respect that honesty and it is the right thing for us to do. He is right that there is a global surge in gas prices and it would be wrong to pretend that we do not have to adjust to that, but what we can do is take the sting out of that adjustment, spread its impact over time and limit its immediate impact. That is the right and responsible approach and I am grateful for his support on that plan.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): The Chancellor comes here and says he is proud of his record. Let me tell him what my constituents think of his record. The Conservative party cut £20 a week from universal credit and was dragged here kicking and screaming for U-turn after U-turn just to feed poor and hungry children. This £350 does not cut it when the Chancellor has wasted billions. More than £6 billion went on wasted personal protective equipment and more than £4.7 billion has been lost to fraud in respect of covid funds. The Chancellor brings £9 billion here when he has lost £12 billion. It does not quite cut it for my constituents, who do not trust this Government because they are not helping my constituents. Those at the bottom end are the ones being hit the most. This does not even come near the £700, let alone the cost of living.

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady talks about universal credit; this Government provided the extra support for people when they needed it during the crisis. All the data and evidence show that throughout the worst of the depths of this pandemic the Government's actions helped those on the lowest incomes the most. That is a record of which I am enormously proud.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I realise that to the champagne socialists on the Opposition Benches £350 is not a lot of money, but my right hon. Friend knows that I care deeply about this issue. My constituents are just about managing but this is a cost of living package for white van men and women throughout the country, including in my Harlow constituency. Will he continue to do everything he can to focus on the just-about-managing group of people who make up my constituents, and make sure that the Government continue to cut the cost of living for hard-working families?

Rishi Sunak: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's support. He rightly champions those people who are just about managing and who work incredibly hard to build a better life for themselves and their families. They

should know that this Government are on their side. I thank him very much for his support and we will continue to champion those people.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Chancellor's plans play Russian roulette with taxpayers' money, gambling that prices will go down, rather than providing a real solution to help families to avoid skyrocketing bills. It is just delaying the pain while he increases taxes by £600 a year for the average household. Why will he not listen to the Liberal Democrats' suggestion of a package that would help families to reduce their bills by £1,000 a year? Surely it is time to admit that he has got it wrong. It is time to scrap the Conservative tax hikes.

Rishi Sunak: We have not heard from the hon. Lady's party any plan to provide the funding that the NHS needs. We all know that the NHS is grappling with the recovery from covid. There is an unprecedented scale of backlogs to work through and the social care system needs urgent reform. The only way to grapple with those challenges is to provide the NHS and social care with a sustainable source of funding. That is what we are doing, it is the responsible and right approach, it is the progressive approach, it will benefit people in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as well as England, and in the long run it will be the right thing for this country.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the comprehensive package of support that he has provided, which is fiscally responsible in the face of global energy-price volatility. My constituents will have the benefit and reassurance of the rebate on energy bills that the Chancellor has announced, but they will not have the reassurance of the council tax support he is making available in England. Will he at least encourage the Welsh Government to follow suit, so that my constituents have the same benefit as those in England, or even go a step further and insist that the benefit is passed on?

Rishi Sunak: I can confirm that the Welsh Administration will receive £175 million or so in Barnett consequentials, which will enable them to provide a similar discount. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury will speak to the Welsh Government later and will very much make the point that we would like to see that happen, to the benefit of all my right hon. Friend's constituents and people throughout Wales.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): On the council tax rebate, some of the poorest families do not pay significant amounts of council tax because they are on council tax support schemes. Even if their council tax bills are less than £150 a year, will they still get the full £150? Will their local authority pay that to them in cash in April? On the £150 million discretionary fund, will it truly be at the discretion of councils to decide how they spend it, or will the Government direct how it is spent?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Gentleman is, of course, well informed on these issues. Our intention is that those people will benefit from the £150, which is why we are providing the discretionary fund. It has been sized with a sense of who those people are and how many they are.

We will of course provide some guidance to local authorities on whom we would expect the support to go to, but ultimately they will be able to make those decisions for themselves.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I thank the Chancellor for an extremely welcome package, which is the latest step in a series of strong reactions to different crises throughout the pandemic and today. He also mentioned improving investment in North sea gas fields, which is very welcome. It is only a temporary set of solutions, however, that will dull the initial economic pain without solving the long-term problem of sky-high energy prices. What conversations has he had with the Energy Secretary, who is sitting next to him, about solutions to deal with those longer-term problems? When can we expect to hear answers on such things as reforming the price cap and the wholesale energy market?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is very thoughtful on such matters and has, rightly, long made the point that we must also ensure that the long-term energy market is working in all our benefit. The Energy Secretary, the Prime Minister and I have been involved in such conversations for some time. The Energy Secretary is working on a set of measures that will address many of my hon. Friend's concerns and he should expect to hear from the Government soon.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): May I say how nice it is to finally see the Chancellor in his place? Some of us had been considering filing a missing persons report given his absence in recent weeks. Although I appreciate his update, for families across Pontypridd and Taff Ely, it is another case of too little, too late. The Welsh Labour Government have doubled the warm home discount scheme and Labour's proposal would have taken £600 off the bills for the poorest in our country, but his plan gives them £350 off. Why does it fall so far short of what is needed and what is proposed?

Rishi Sunak: I am sorry that the hon. Lady did not welcome the £175 million in Barnett consequential for the Welsh Administration. The Government are providing significant support for those on middle incomes, because they are also struggling, and we believe that is the right approach.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I welcome the Chancellor's recognition, as my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) said, of the importance of a long-term energy policy. I thank him very much for the help for council tax payers. Bands A to D cover most folks on the Island. Can he confirm that he is talking about people with primary residences on the Island and nationally?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I confirm that the £150 is not for those with second homes or empty homes. We will make that crystal clear in how the policy is executed.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Chancellor for his contribution. I do not want to be churlish—a fair bit of money has been set aside and we appreciate that—but with the further rise in energy prices and the uplifted cost of living in general, working families will

have to choose what to cut out of their lives to make ends meet. I put on record that I welcome the £150 million for Northern Ireland and the other Barnett consequential, but will he consider and commit to reviewing the child benefit threshold for families whose wages are the same but are simply not worth the same in real money terms as when the threshold was introduced in 2013?

Rishi Sunak: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman recognises that there are two sets of Barnett consequential for Northern Ireland stemming from each of the policies, which total £250 million. He will appreciate that I cannot comment on future tax and welfare policy but, as always, I will take what his says and reflect on it.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I warmly welcome the Chancellor's statement because 94% of properties in Stoke-on-Trent are in council tax bands A to C, so the £150 rebate will do wonders across Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke. From his recent visit to the city, he knows that the ceramics sector is an energy-intensive industry and will be looking for more creative solutions in the short term to help with rising energy costs. Can he confirm that he will meet me and other Stoke-on-Trent MPs to discuss those ideas further?

Rishi Sunak: I am always happy to meet my hon. Friends from Stoke, which benefited from not just one, not just two, but three successful levelling-up fund bids, and which I was pleased to visit recently. My hon. Friend is right and he is, rightly, a proper champion for the ceramics sector in this House. I enjoyed meeting representatives from that sector on my recent visit and I would be happy to meet him and them to discuss the situation further.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): We all know that the Chancellor is a fast-talking, slick operator who knows how to keep his head down when it is useful, but I have been in the House since 1979, and he is the most incompetent Chancellor that I have ever seen. When children go to bed—[*Interruption.*] He does not like it, but when children in my constituency go to bed with no food in their tummies and no heat in their homes, what does he think is the honourable position of a Chancellor who has just allowed £4.3 billion to be taken in fraud from one of his direct policies under his watch? Any other Chancellor that I have known would have come to the House today to resign.

Rishi Sunak: I will let this Government's record on economic policy speak for itself. It is a record of which I am proud. I can provide the hon. Gentleman with the reassurance that I and the Government remain committed to tackling fraud wherever we see it. He mentioned the figure of £4.9 billion. As I said to the House in oral questions on Tuesday, that estimate has already been reduced by a third—by £1.6 billion—because of the actions that we are taking. I will not go into them all now, but he should know that we will go after everyone wherever we can to recover that money for the taxpayer, and I am confident that we will do a very good job.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): This is a targeted package that helps those just about managing, which is entirely right. The last Labour Government closed six nuclear power stations and had a policy of no new nuclear. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, alongside these

[Jacob Young]

measures to help people in the short term, it is imperative that we invest in our long-term energy security—in domestic gas production, in renewables, and, crucially, in new nuclear?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about some of the failures of policy that the Labour party propagated in power. That is being fixed by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. We are investing not just in new nuclear, as he said, with billions of pounds at the spending review, but in offshore wind, and—as he knows in his part of the world—carbon capture and storage and hydrogen, where Teesside is playing a starring role in that green energy revolution.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The Chancellor will be aware that nearly 20% of households in Wales are not connected to the mains gas grid. In rural areas such as Ceredigion, that figure actually rises to more than 80%. Research by the Office for National Statistics notes that Ceredigion suffered the highest increase in fuel bills over any area in mainland UK in the past year, increasing by £863 on average. Will the Chancellor confirm whether the rebate announced today will also apply to households that are not connected to the main power grids?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point and one that colleagues not just in Wales, but in England and Scotland will also be asking, not least my own constituents. I can tell him that the rebate will be delivered through electricity bills to solve the exact problem that he mentions, which is much more universal. Separately, obviously, the council tax discount in England is through the council tax system, so it is agnostic to the heating source, and I would expect the Welsh Government, should they choose to do the same thing, to be able to solve that problem in that way.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): Quite simply, this is a superb plan—very well done. My right hon. Friend is right to question the Opposition's idea of a windfall tax, given that Gordon Brown completely stifled the telecoms market in the late '90s by doing exactly the same. Speaking as the chair of the all-party group for district councils, I wonder whether my right hon. Friend will join me in thanking councils for once again being able to offer swift and agile responses to local communities and families in helping us to deliver this today.

Rishi Sunak: As a former local government Minister, it gives me great pleasure to pay tribute to district councils and to the work of the District Councils' Network. I do not know whether John Fuller is still running it, but it does an excellent job. Once again, when we need it to help us to deliver policies, it steps up. I can confirm also that it will have received new burdens funding for doing that, but I thank it for all its work, and my hon. Friend is right to champion it.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Even before covid, a third of children in Hull North, many in working families, were living in poverty. With the cost of living crisis and energy prices soaring, will the measures that the Chancellor is introducing

today see an increase, or a decrease, in the number of children living in poverty by Christmas?

Rishi Sunak: Thanks to the actions of this and previous Governments, since 2010, there are 200,000 fewer children living in poverty. We also know that children growing up in workless households are five times more likely to be in poverty than those who have working parents, which is why it is very good news that the number of children in workless households has fallen by 700,000 over the past decade. That is the best way to get children out of poverty: find jobs for their parents, and that is what this Government are committed to doing.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Chancellor for his honesty in stating that we cannot completely remove inflationary global pressures, and for his focus on supporting hard-working middle-income and low-income families. I want to ask about the discretionary £150 million fund. In particular, will he ensure that that funding is directed so that all those living in military family accommodation who are not eligible to pay council tax are eligible for the £150 discount?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is right to highlight one of the categories of those who are exempt that we want to get support to and ensure that they are included in the discretionary fund. I know from our conversations that she has also highlighted those living in rural constituencies such as hers who are off the gas grid, and I hope she is reassured by the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake).

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The Chancellor's proposal to "buy now, pay back later" while ignoring the eye-watering profits from oil and gas companies, as he did with the fraudsters, tells us all we need to know about whose side he is on. Prepayment meter customers face a much higher rate—£708 on average—so can he tell us how these plans will help the people who pop down to the corner shop to top up their prepayment cards?

Rishi Sunak: Around 4 million households have prepayment meters, and about 40% of those will be able to receive the rebate on bills automatically because of the nature of their prepayment meter. For the remaining 60%, we will have to do something more manual and there are various ways we can do that, whether by sending barcodes or QR codes through the post or by email—[Interruption.] Before the Opposition say anything, that is exactly how we already deliver the warm home discount to those people, and we did exactly the same thing in a similar measure in 2012 under the coalition. This affects less than 9% of all households, but we have a plan for them. We will work with the energy companies to ensure that all those on prepayment meters benefit in exactly the same way.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Residents in the Kettering constituency will warmly welcome the assistance that the Chancellor has announced to help them with their rising energy bills. As well as the measures he has announced today, there is an additional £1.8 billion of support out there in unclaimed pension credit. One million pensioners are eligible and not claiming, including 4,500 in north Northamptonshire. Just as we reached out

to pensioners to come forward to get their vaccination, please can we reach out to those people who are not claiming, because some of them have the highest energy bills?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, which he also made the other day in Treasury questions, when we committed to looking at how best we could take up his suggestions. I think I am right in saying—the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my right hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) will correct me if I am wrong—that the warm home discount is already moving to a more automatic system for that rebate for those on pension credit, but we will of course take his suggestions on board and figure out how best to improve what we do.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Each week, the Prime Minister tells us that there are 420,000 more people in work than there were before the pandemic, yet the Office for National Statistics tells us that there are 506,000 fewer people in work than before the pandemic. The reason for that, as the Chancellor knows, is that the Prime Minister excludes the self-employed. Will the Chancellor correct the record to show that there are in fact half a million fewer people in work, and explain why, in the circumstances, he is imposing a massive national insurance tax on jobs?

Rishi Sunak: If the hon. Gentleman looks at the remarks I made earlier, he will see that I was clear that there are 400,000 more people on payroll, and that is the right use of that statistic. It is obviously harder to track those in self-employment because we have real-time information numbers from HMRC for those on payroll. We are proud of our track record on jobs. Unemployment in this country was forecast to reach 12%, with millions of people unemployed, but unemployment has now fallen for almost 10 straight months. It is almost back to the record lows we saw pre-pandemic, and we have record job vacancies and record low redundancies. That is all evidence that our plan for jobs is working.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): As somebody who supported a VAT cut, may I invite my right hon. Friend to confirm that people in Wycombe will receive more help faster under his plan?

Rishi Sunak: I can give my hon. Friend the reassurance that the vast majority of people in his constituency will receive £350. Those in council tax bands A to D will get £150 in April. That is more than a VAT cut would have given them, and it will come faster. I am grateful to have his continued support.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Older people, sick people at home and many disabled people will need to put on their heating for longer, and therefore will be paying more. What additional steps will the Chancellor take to ensure that they are not pushed further into poverty, and not least as he has tangled with the pensions triple lock this year, what has he got against older people?

Rishi Sunak: This Government and previous Conservative Governments have a proud track record of supporting those who are retired and are pensioners. Because of the

triple lock, which has been in place because of a Conservative Government, pensions are now at their highest level relative to earnings in 30-odd years, and we are protecting pensioners with a double lock this forthcoming year. Of course, the winter fuel payment, with up to £300 of support for those over the state pension age, will address exactly the hon. Member's concerns.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Matt Vickers—[*Interruption.*] Sorry, Martin Vickers.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It must have been the mask.

As the Chancellor did at the time of the pandemic, he has put together a very comprehensive protective shield around people in my constituency, and that is very welcome. Many well-paid jobs are being created, particularly in the energy sector, thanks to Government policies, but there are many, particularly in food processing or the security sector, who are on very modest incomes and fixed incomes. Can my right hon. Friend give them an assurance that he will keep this policy under review so that if the energy price rise continues, as is likely, they can be reassured that support will be available?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is always a champion for those who are working hard and doing the right thing, and that is why he has rightly championed the freeport in his constituency to provide jobs and opportunity for those families. I can give him that reassurance. It is because it is likely that energy prices will remain high and may even increase when the October price cap is set that the rebate of £200 will come in in October—in that month. I hope that will help at that time if energy bills continue to rise then, and of course the £150 will come much sooner, which gives him the reassurance he needs. As I said earlier, we do have to be honest and recognise that we are all going to have to adjust to higher energy prices, but what we can do is slow the pace and scale of that adjustment for families across the country.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Is the Chancellor comfortable about the fact that he has given more support to fraudsters, writing off billions of pounds of debts, than he is giving to hard-pressed families for whom this just prolongs the pain? This 54% price rise will be paid over four years, won't it, Chancellor?

Rishi Sunak: As I outlined earlier this week, nothing has been written off. We are committed to going after everybody who has defrauded the taxpayer. It is important to remember the context. These schemes were delivered at enormous scale: 9 million people benefited from the furlough scheme and 1.5 million small businesses benefited from bounce back loans. At the time—we can remember the context—I was here almost every other day being rightly held to account by Members on both sides about the speed of support that we were getting to businesses in all of our constituencies that needed cash as quickly as possible. In those circumstances, I had to make balanced trade-offs and judgments about the best way to support those people. I am confident in the judgments we made, but it is also right, now that we are through the pandemic, that we go after anyone who has defrauded the Government and the taxpayer with the full force of the law.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I join my colleagues on these Government Benches, and I am sure many secretly on the Opposition Benches, in thanking my right hon. Friend for his measures today. As he is aware, we have some real deprivation in my beautiful constituency of Hastings and Rye. Can he confirm that the measures announced by him today target support to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in my constituency, are more generous as well as more financially sensible than Labour's uncoded plans, and will reach the families who most need help now?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Getting cash to people who need it quickly is paramount in this circumstance. That is why the £150 will go to those in her constituency in council tax bands A to D in April, which will provide immediate relief. As she said, this is a financially responsible approach to this problem, because we do have to continue getting our borrowing and debt down so that the plan we have put in place maintains us on our path. It is actually important to recognise—I have made this point before—that one of the reasons why I care about getting our borrowing and debt to better levels is so that we have the resilience to respond to shocks exactly like this, and that is why it is important that we do rebuild such resilience.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): The Chancellor's package offers £350 off to the poorest households. Labour's proposals offer £600 off to the poorest households. The cap has gone up by £693. Why is the Chancellor offering the poorest households so much less than they would get under Labour?

Rishi Sunak: Those of us on the Government Benches believe that it is also right that we support those on middle incomes; those families are also working hard and they deserve our support. It is important that they know that the Government are on their side at times like this, and that is why we have taken the approach that we have. But of course we are cognisant of those on lower incomes. As I said, this is a progressive package. Flat-rate payments are a greater percentage of income for people on lower incomes, and indeed with smaller energy bills. As I have outlined, we have a range of other interventions specifically targeted at those people.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): I welcome this generous plan, especially the inclusion of families on middle incomes, which will do a lot to help many of my constituents in Rushcliffe. Does my right hon. Friend the Chancellor agree that now is the time for us to be investing in our domestic energy industry and energy security—in turbo charging our move to clean energy, as we are doing in the east midlands freeport, rather than risk driving investment from the UK with a counterproductive windfall tax as the Labour party would?

Rishi Sunak: I agree with my hon. Friend. She puts the point excellently. Government Members are in favour of more investment in domestic energy, more jobs for the British economy and greater energy security for our nation.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): With families facing an extra £2,800 of expenses, this package does not really touch the sides at all, does it? With regard to electricity, the Chancellor said:

“with the Government meeting the cost in full.”

But he is not is he? He is spreading it over five years, which means that next year, when electricity prices continue to rise, the poorest families will face increased bills and have to find £40 to pay back to the Chancellor. You have not put a lid on it, Chancellor, you have just kicked the can further down the road.

Rishi Sunak: As my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) said earlier, £350 is a significant amount of money for families up and down the country, and I think it will make a real difference and lessen their anxiety. What I was talking about was the council tax rebate, which will be fully Exchequer funded with no cash due back.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Chancellor for meeting me and colleagues and responding so positively on this issue. He may remember that I asked him to ensure that any support extended to cover those just above benefit thresholds because they are often most in need of help. How does the support that he has announced today for those constituents compare with the suggestions made by Labour?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend, as ever, makes a thoughtful contribution, and I enjoyed our conversations. He was right to champion those who are on middle incomes. As a result of those conversations with him and others, we have designed a package that does exactly as I think he would like to have seen. By targeting support at those in council tax bands A to D, four out of five households—those up to middle income, those just about managing—will receive £150 extra support, and they will get that support in April.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): A poll by Survation today reveals that 63% of the public support a windfall tax on oil and gas producers' profits. It is not like this Government to ignore the polls so may I suggest that, rather than misnaming, as he did in his statement, a renewable loan as a discount, why not go for the windfall tax and give that money to our hard-pressed constituents?

Rishi Sunak: We have had this debate. Conservatives believe in more investment in our domestic energy sector. We want to support British jobs and British energy security and we believe in doing the right, responsible thing. That is what a responsible Conservative Government do.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for these packages, which will help my constituents across my constituency. On the issue of a windfall tax, will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Labour party's call for a windfall tax would undermine competition in the market, reduce investment and kill off jobs? Ultimately it would mean that energy prices were likely to be higher for longer and hit the poorest the hardest.

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Some 200,000 jobs are supported in that industry, and as I pointed out earlier, there are £11 billion-worth of projects waiting to get going. I would like to see those projects

go ahead, which will be good for the country's energy security, good for our economy and good for jobs. I know that the Energy Minister and I share that ambition.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): I thank the Chancellor for his statement. My constituents in Bassetlaw will be breathing a sigh of relief at his announcements today, which blow the Opposition's VAT cut out of the water. The Chancellor mentioned wholesale prices; as we become more self-sufficient and move to renewables and new nuclear, is he able to outline what the Government and the Treasury are doing to tackle this problem at source? May I suggest the excellent step fusion project in Bassetlaw that we are bidding for?

Rishi Sunak: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support, and I am glad that this announcement will provide some reassurance to his constituents, who I know would be worried about the cost of living. I have heard warm noises about his fusion project from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. We announced, I think, £120 million for advanced nuclear technologies in the spending review, and there is no doubt that there is a productive conversation to be had about how we allocate that money to projects such as his.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for today's statement, and for confirming that this significant £9 billion package is going to be targeted at those who need help most. He also highlighted that 80% of cost increases are coming from the global wholesale price increase, so is he going to continue his focus on trying to insulate the UK as much as possible from those global price fluctuations, increasing our energy security, boosting domestic production and ensuring that our energy supply is diverse in nature, sustainable for the future and significant in scale?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is important that we have diversity of supply: that is what we are doing, whether through offshore wind, nuclear, carbon capture and storage, or exploiting domestic gas. We are doing all those things to build diversity of supply for our security. My hon. Friend is right to highlight that, in the long term, that is the right policy for British customers.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I welcome these targeted and fair measures that will help those who need help most. While Labour's VAT plans would help by just £89, I welcome the fact that this council tax rebate will help 89% of households in Yorkshire and Humber—I have just had the figures through—with a £150 rebate. Will the Chancellor also confirm that those who fall outside the A to D bandings and who still need help will be able to get that help through the extra discretionary funding for local councils?

Rishi Sunak: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, because I know that this is an issue that was on his mind, and he wanted to make sure his constituents got the support

they needed at a time of anxiety for them. I can confirm that the £144 million discretionary fund is there to take care of those people—we estimate around 300,000 people—who are on means-tested benefits and happen to live in council tax bands above A to D. That is why that discretionary fund is there, to get support to the people he mentioned.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I thank the Chancellor for the £350 help that will really benefit everyone in Rother Valley. Does he agree that it is right that this Government are helping not just those on means-tested benefits, but those not on benefits—the lower and middle-income families—because they also need a helping hand? It is great that this Government reward hard work and those who are doing the right thing.

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He has championed his constituents who are working hard and doing the right thing, and today's announcement will give them reassurance that this Government and their Member of Parliament are on their side.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Finally, my former constituent, Mr Holden.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker; it is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair. Could my right hon. Friend confirm that all UK households will benefit from the £200 smoothing rebate, and that almost 95% of County Durham residents will benefit from the £150 council tax rebate, including those who are off-grid—a similar proportion to the constituency of the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), who I see has now scuttled away? That £150 is over 50% more than Labour's VAT plan, which would have benefited the richest people most. Will the Chancellor continue to pursue a one-nation Conservative approach, not an inner London two-kitchen one?

Rishi Sunak: There were so many excellent points in my hon. Friend's question. The only thing on which I will correct him is that the energy rebate is Great Britain-wide, because the Northern Ireland energy market is devolved and we do not have the legal powers or the regulator to do it there. Everything else he said is spot on, and I can confirm that this Government will continue to be on the side of his hard-working constituents, whom he does a great job of championing. Today's announcement will give them the reassurance they need that, at a time of rising prices, this Conservative Government are stepping in to help, as we have and always will.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Chancellor for his statement and for answering questions for well over an hour.

Covid-19: Purchasing Effort

12.45 pm

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will update the House on our purchasing efforts in response to the covid-19 pandemic.

A little over two years ago, we and the whole world found ourselves in unprecedented circumstances. We were faced with a virus about which we knew very little, but we knew from day one that our absolute priority was to save lives and protect our most vulnerable. Throughout the pandemic we have worked night and day to make sure those performing heroics on the frontline have the protection they need. This includes making the tough but necessary decisions needed to keep the country safe.

With the pandemic pushing health systems across the world to breaking point, we acted quickly and decisively to protect the NHS and to help it continue providing world-class care to the public. In a highly competitive global market, and with many countries imposing export bans, we were none the less able to secure the personal protective equipment needed. We secured billions of items of PPE, we obtained 30,000 ventilators by the end of June 2020 and we delivered more than 17.5 billion items to protect our frontline workers.

The supply of these vital items helped to keep the NHS open throughout the pandemic, but the scale of the challenge we faced in sourcing them should not be underestimated. The unique and unprecedented situation during the early days of the pandemic led to huge inflation in prices and intense global competition to secure scarce supplies. For instance, the average cost of nitrile gloves increased over sixfold at the height of the pandemic, compared with pre-pandemic levels.

At that time of national emergency, when lives were on the line, we simply had to change our approach to procurement and our appetite for risk. We had to balance the risk of contracts not performing and supplies being priced at a premium 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 the pace and volume we did, based on the information we had at the time. The action we took protected thousands of frontline healthcare workers in the NHS and social care. However, now that the world market for PPE has stabilised, the value of some categories of goods is inevitably much lower than the price at which they were originally purchased.

I reinforce to the House that 97% of the PPE we ordered was suitable and fit for use, with only a small proportion deemed unsuitable, and we are actively seeking to recover costs from suppliers wherever possible in those cases. Throughout the pandemic, the Department's anti-fraud unit acted quickly to investigate all allegations of fraud, and we will be looking to recover any money for damaged or inadequate stock.

We are now in a position where we are confident 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 allowed us to meet demand through 2020-21 and 2021-22, and our existing PPE stocks will continue to support us throughout 2022-23.

We will keep working to maximise value from our stockpile, as the high standards of protection we have set for NHS workers mean that some of it may be able to be used in alternative settings. The Department has set up a redistribution team to identify alternative uses for stock that we do not intend or expect to use. For example, we are donating masks to both the Department for Transport and the Department for Education to aid compliance with face covering requirements on public transport and to support schools following their reopening in March 2021.

Medical professionals in my Department have also been working closely with colleagues in medical surveillance authorities to review stock that has exceeded its manufacturers' use-by date but is not necessarily unusable. We have also begun a tender for a third-party medical laboratory to provide official testing of PPE products, with a view to extending their shelf life.

During the pandemic, we have taken steps to strengthen this country's PPE supply chain, including manufacturing more PPE here in the UK. We have now signed contracts with more than 30 UK-based companies, reducing our reliance on manufacturers overseas, and we now have high confidence that we have sufficient stock to cover all future covid-19-related demands.

Getting PPE to those who need it has been one of the toughest logistical tasks of the pandemic. We make no apologies for taking the steps that were necessary so that we could save lives and protect this country in its time of need.

I commend this statement to the House.

12.50 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement. But what a disgrace that the Secretary of State did not come to the House today, to account for the inexcusable and unacceptable level of waste in his Department, or when the Department first published the accounts, or two days afterwards, when they were reported on the front pages of several newspapers and on broadcast news. Perhaps the Secretary of State's silence and absence tell us that he is relaxed about losing billions of pounds of taxpayers' money, or perhaps it is simply that he is too ashamed to show his face. He had to be dragged to the House and when he was, he bottled it and sent his deputy.

The Department of Health and Social Care snuck out its annual accounts on the final day on which they were legally required, 10 months after the end of the financial year, and, I am sure by total coincidence, at 5.30 pm on the day Sue Gray published her update. Buried on page 199 was the revelation that the Department lost a staggering £8.7 billion on PPE. That is more than two thirds of the Department's total spend on PPE written off as losses, double the amount it is spending on the hospital building programme, and almost as much as we spend on the salaries of every nurse in England for an entire year. Why? Because the PPE was unusable, going out of date, and bought in at eye-watering prices because the Government were in a state of desperation having run down our supplies before the pandemic arrived.

We know that many Conservative Members privately—sometimes even publicly—agree with Labour that the national insurance rise is an unfair hit on working families facing a cost of living crisis. How will they

explain to their voters that, taken together with the £4.3 billion they handed out to fraudsters, this Government have thrown away more than a year's receipts of the national insurance rise that they are now imposing on working families?

It is not just that the Conservatives are the party of high taxes because they are the party of low growth; they are the party of high taxes because they are the party of waste and incompetence. Think of what the NHS could have done with those funds. It could have reduced waiting lists and waiting times, improved access to GPs and rebuilt hospitals for the 21st century.

Of course covid came as a shock, but that does not explain why the Conservative Government ran down Britain's supply of PPE before the pandemic, leaving us exposed to price hikes and profiteering. Perhaps the Minister can explain why a global pandemic necessarily leads to Conservative party donors and the former Secretary of State's pub landlord receiving special treatment and hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money.

It is not just PPE. Why did the Department fail to collect shipments from ports on time, costing taxpayers £111 million in additional fees? Why did the Department fail to pay its bills on time and incur late fees of £1.6 million as a result? Why did the Department spend £250 million on testing materials, ventilators and medical equipment, none of which can be used?

Is not it the case that when this Conservative Government thought no one was watching, they abandoned any pretence of being careful stewards of public finances, bunged millions to their mates and donors, and now working families are footing the bill? What would Mrs Thatcher, the grocer's daughter, whose father instilled in her the value of thrift, make of this lot?

Is not the truth that the Conservative party has changed? You cannot trust this Conservative party to show respect to the people or to Parliament. You cannot trust this Conservative Party to keep taxes low. You cannot trust this Conservative Party to spend taxpayers' money wisely. Indeed, the only thing that has not changed about the Conservatives is the age-old truth that you cannot trust the Tories with the NHS.

Edward Argar: It is always a pleasure to appear opposite the shadow Secretary of State. I will not take it as a personal affront that he would prefer it to be the Secretary of State rather than me.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of important points. He cited Mrs Thatcher, and suggested that the Government had changed their position. If we are talking about sudden changes in position, I feel that I should quote the present shadow Chancellor, the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves)—formerly shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster—who, in April 2020, wrote to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster:

"We need Government to strain every sinew and utilise untapped resources in UK manufacturing, to deliver essential equipment to frontline workers. This must be a national effort which leaves no stone unturned."

She was right. I agreed with her sentiment then, and I still do—and we did do that—but it appears that the Opposition do not agree with it any more.

Let me turn to the hon. Gentleman's other points. He kept suggesting—it makes a good headline for him, I am sure, but sadly I fear it is simply inaccurate—that this is money lost or wasted. It is not. As the hon. Gentleman knows from his days as a shadow Treasury Minister, this is a reflection of buying PPE at the height of the market, at the height of a global pandemic—

Wes Streeting: Why? Were there not enough masks?

Edward Argar: I will come to that point in a moment. It is a reflection of that, and now, in accounting terms, a reflection of what its value is today.

The hon. Gentleman should also be aware that the vast bulk of that £8.7 billion is down to exactly the same reason: PPE purchased at the height of the market. Now that we have a stable market, we have a sustainable supply. I make no apologies, and I know that my right hon. and hon. Friends will make no apologies, for doing exactly what the shadow Chancellor said we should do, which was to strain every sinew to make sure that the NHS had the PPE that it needed. We achieved that.

Wes Streeting: She did not say "by giving a contract to a pub landlord".

Edward Argar: That is an important point, and I will turn to it in just a second.

The hon. Gentleman was also wrong to say that the money was thrown away. He knows that that is not what has happened here. He knows that this is about stock that has been written down in value, not written off. He knows that the vast bulk of that remaining is fit for use. We set very high standards in the NHS, but it is fit for use in other settings, and we are ensuring that we explore those other avenues, so that it can be used.

The hon. Gentleman talked about pub landlords. He will have heard my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) make this point in the Chamber. No contract was awarded to that individual, so I would caution him to be a little bit careful about the allegations he makes, and to check his facts before he does so.

Let me now turn to one of the broader themes raised by the hon. Gentleman. He talked about running down PPE stocks. Can he name any country in Europe that did not also have to buy vast amounts of PPE at the height of the pandemic, at the height of the market? This pandemic was unprecedented. We learned more about it with every day that passed. When we first started purchasing PPE, we were confronted with horrific pictures from hospitals in Bergamo in Italy. We saw the challenges that were faced, and we moved fast to ensure that our frontline had what it needed. We strained every sinew, and we got the PPE that our country needed.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the revaluation of the stock simply reflects global market price fluctuations? Will he confirm that the PPE is being used? Will he also disregard the comments from Opposition Members, who are peddling known inaccuracies and whose comments on the finances show them to be utterly economically illiterate?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend puts it even better than I could have done. He is absolutely right to emphasise that this is a reflection of our straining every sinew to buy what we needed at the height of the pandemic, with inflated global prices, to give our NHS workers the protection that they needed. The global market has now returned to normal levels, and that, coupled with the fact that we have helped to stimulate and build a UK manufacturing base for PPE in this country, is a simple fact of economics. The shadow Secretary of State, who I think was formerly a shadow Exchequer Secretary, should know that. Sadly, the fact that that is not reflected in his comments, for whatever reason, causes me to question how much the Labour party has really learned about how to manage our nation's finances and economy.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. Yet again, this Government are set rigid on making the working poor pay for their ineptitude and mismanagement. We know that £4.3 billion has been wasted, written off as covid loan fraud. We know that the Government spent £12 billion on PPE in England up to March 2021, of which £9 billion has been declared by the Government themselves as “wasted”—*[Interruption.]* We have some chuntering from those in a sedentary position, but I will continue.

Does the Minister believe that wasting all that money spent on PPE is a sign of good governance, when £2 of every £3 spent on VIP lane contracts was wasted due to so-called errors in supply? Now hard-working people will be taxed £12 billion by this Government to pay for their mismanagement, when the Bank of England has just told us that UK households must be warned to “brace themselves” for the biggest annual fall in living standards in 30 years, since records began, and inflation is set to soar to 7%. Why is his Government not vigorously pursuing companies that provided £9 billion-worth of useless PPE equipment to ensure that they pay it back? Will he assure the House that his Government will pursue that with complete vigour?

Kleptocracy is defined as a situation where politicians enrich themselves or their associates through the funnelling of public money and assets to their connections outside the rule of law—a statement we know all too well in this House. Given that the UK Government's VIP, Tory crony fast lanes for Tory party associates have been declared unlawful in the Court of Session and seen billions of pounds wastefully funnelled to politically connected friends of this Tory Government, does the Minister agree that his Government are fast becoming a kleptocracy?

Edward Argar: In general, and certainly after that contribution, I will take no lessons in financial illiteracy from the SNP. The hon. Gentleman regularly, in that contribution, referred to £8.7 billion or £9 billion—rounding, if he wishes to—as wasted. He will know that, as I have set out, it is not wasted. It is a write-down on the value of stock, but it is not wasted. That stock is available. That is the point I make to him. The vast majority of that stock is available and in warehouses. This is an accounting point about the value of what was paid at the time compared with its value in a recovered market.

I will pick up one point I missed with the shadow Secretary of State, who I hope will forgive me. He mentioned ventilators, and I apologise for not answering that point. In the case of ventilators, we followed the scientific advice at the time, which was that ventilators were the most effective way of treating those who were severely ill. Thankfully, due to amazing advances by our clinicians and scientists and to the action taken by this Government, we did not need them and the treatments available improved significantly. Again, I make no apologies for our being prepared for all eventualities.

To conclude on the contribution of the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar), I reiterate the same thing: we make no apologies for having strained every sinew—in a global pandemic, at the height of the market, when some countries were imposing export bans—to purchase the PPE to protect our frontline workers. I also pay tribute to the officials who worked flat out, often through the night, sourcing the PPE. They were the ones assessing it, and they were rigorous in their assessments. I put on record my tribute and my gratitude—

Steven Bonnar indicated assent.

Edward Argar: I think the hon. Gentleman nodded assent, so we may be in agreement on that point. I put on record my tribute and my gratitude to them for all their hard work to protect the frontline.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): In reality, back at the beginning of the pandemic, the Opposition were calling for the Government to go faster. It seems to me that one of the great success stories of this Government is that they got the PPE and the ventilators and, by doing so, saved a lot of lives. Does the excellent Minister agree that, unfortunately, the rhetoric coming from the Opposition now is completely different from what it was at the time of the pandemic?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Far be it from me to suggest that hindsight characterises the approach adopted by Opposition Front Benchers, but he is absolutely right. I mentioned the shadow Chancellor, the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves). She also said in this place:

“Those who look after the sick and the vulnerable deserve our protection, and getting PPE to them is the priority of all of us.”—*[Official Report, 4 May 2020; Vol. 675, c. 412.]*

She was absolutely right and remains right, and that is why this Government did exactly that. Protecting the taxpayers' pound is hugely important. Equally, so too is procuring the kit that protects lives. In the unique circumstances that we faced at the time in 2020, I believe that this Government made the right choices.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): For context, £9 billion would have given every NHS nurse a 100% bonus on their salary or it could provide the funding needed to solve the issue of autistic people and people with learning disabilities being detained in inappropriate units because no funding is available to support them in the community. Instead, it is clear that large amounts were wasted on unused and unsuitable PPE, some of which, we understand, will have to be burned. I remind the Minister that we could have had a stockpile of PPE in this country if Exercise Cygnus in

2016 had been handled responsibly. Exercise Cygnus showed gaping holes in our emergency preparedness and we have to learn the lesson from that.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady; to be fair, we may not always agree, but she always makes thoughtful points and knows this subject well. However, many right hon. and hon. Members across the House have regularly said that Exercise Cygnus gave everyone everything they needed to know in how to manage this pandemic, which is completely not the case. That was a flu pandemic exercise with a number of preconditions, one of which was that, at a certain point, it was assumed that antivirals would become available within—I think, off the top of my head—nine weeks of the pandemic beginning. That was not the case, because we were dealing with a completely new virus, so although there are valuable lessons to be learned, we need to be very careful about drawing direct parallels.

The hon. Lady rightly talked about the sum of money and highlighted the impact. She is right that £8.7 billion is a very significant sum of public money, but she also must acknowledge that that £8.7 billion was not wasted, because the PPE exists. This is an accounting point about what the purchase price was compared with the value now, with a stable marketplace for that. Only a very small fraction of that stockpile has been deemed not fit for use and, in those cases, we continue to investigate, through contractual mechanisms and elsewhere, what we can do to recover that money.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): The embassy of one of our major international partners had to send staff to Sofia with a suitcase of money handcuffed to their wrist in order to procure PPE for their health and social care. Does my hon. Friend not think that the Opposition would be better off celebrating the herculean efforts that meant that PPE could be got to our NHS providers and our local authority and social care providers, rather than engaging in such transparently cynical party political point scoring?

Edward Argar: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. As I said in response to the SNP Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar), I hope the whole House could agree on paying tribute to all those civil servants and others who moved heaven and earth to ensure that we got the PPE that we needed for the frontline. That is the most important factor. We did what we needed to get the PPE to protect people and to protect lives.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): *Private Eye* has uncovered £600 million of PPE contracts awarded to Unispace Global, an interior design company, through the VIP lane. The Department has paid the money to Unispace but it is not shown on the company accounts, so will the Minister strain every sinew and will there be an investigation to account for the £600 million of public money?

Edward Argar: In any circumstance where a contractual obligation has not been met or where goods that have been supplied do not meet that—I am not suggesting that is the case in this situation—we will look into it.

The hon. Gentleman mentions company accounts, but that is a matter for the company and its filing of accounts; it is not a matter for Her Majesty's Government.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): There has been a lot of unhelpful speculation about loss and wastage of PPE in recent weeks. Some of this speculation is blatantly false, and it is important that we do not overly politicise the issue, because the Government acted to do the right thing at the right time. The use of language is also really important. Does the Minister agree that this is not about outright loss and that it is about accounting write-down?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend puts his finger on the issue absolutely. I mentioned in response to the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), who is no longer in her place, that a small proportion of this £8.7 billion went on PPE that did not meet the standard, and we continue to pursue those contracts and investigate them. However, my hon. Friend is right to say that the vast majority of this money purchased PPE that was delivered and is usable, and the difference in money reflects the fact that we bought at the height of a global pandemic, doing whatever was needed to get the supplies we needed. Of course, in the two to two and a half years since, that market has stabilised, with significantly more manufacturing also in this country.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister mentioned in his statement that the Government took these difficult decisions to keep the country safe. The hard-working staff in St Thomas' Hospital in my constituency took the decision to come to work every day during this pandemic to keep the country safe. The Minister mentions that this is a value of accounting and it is not real money. Can he tell me: how much more could we have got for nurses for that £8.7 billion? My local nurses who are watching this statement are thinking that they could have done with that pay increase.

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady will know that I have not said that this is not real money; I have said that what has been published here in the accounts is what is required for an accounting purpose. The PPE was purchased, and that was done at the height of a global pandemic and at extremely inflated prices, because every country was desperately seeking to acquire the PPE that was needed. That situation has stabilised over the past two years and PPE can now be purchased for a much, much cheaper rate. Again, I make no apology for our purchasing this PPE to protect these very nurses, who did an amazing job in her local hospital, from the effects of covid.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): This Government acted quickly and decisively to secure as much PPE for the frontline as possible and as many vaccines as possible, while the Labour party carped from the sidelines, attacked the vaccine taskforce and played politics, just as it is doing today. On vaccines, will the Minister join me in welcoming the decision by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency to approve the Teesside vaccine, Novavax, which is being manufactured in Teesside for use in the UK?

Edward Argar: That was a dexterous way of weaving together PPE and vaccines, but my hon. Friend is right to pay tribute to the amazing work done by the vaccine

[Edward Argar]

taskforce and by officials and others across Government in meeting the needs of our population during the pandemic. Of course I join him in welcoming the Novavax vaccine and the opportunities it presents for wonderful Teesside.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I do not think anyone in this Chamber has said, at any point, that things should not have moved quickly to secure PPE. Nobody, on this side at least, has said that this should involve the use of a VIP lane, crony contracts or contracts for pals. I am sure that the Minister will say that all these allegations are entirely unfounded, and I understand his point of view on that. Given that, will he put Government backing behind my Ministerial Interests (Emergency Powers) Bill, to ensure that such actions could not happen in the future without this House being made fully aware of them?

Edward Argar: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for, as ever, dextrously mentioning his Bill. I think he has done that to me once before when I have been at the Dispatch Box discussing similar issues. I am sure that Ministers, and indeed the Leader of the House, will read it very carefully.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In the early months of the pandemic, getting PPE to Kettering General Hospital and local care homes was the absolute No. 1 priority. A very sophisticated distribution network had to be established involving the Army to ensure PPE was delivered to the right place at the right time, as best as possible. I believe that, starting from scratch, only 1% of certain PPE products were actually made in this country and over the course of the pandemic that has been increased to 70%-plus. Can my hon. Friend the hospitals Minister assure me that, God forbid, were we ever to have a pandemic again, we could source most of our PPE requirements from British manufacturers and that we now have a robust and resilient supply and distribution chain?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and join him in paying tribute to the work of his local healthcare system during the pandemic. He makes a couple of points. First, he is absolutely right to highlight that this was ramped up at pace. Initially, the NHS supplied PPE directly to about 250 hospital trusts and other trusts. In the early months of the pandemic, that was ramped up to supplying it to well over 50,000 different settings. That is a phenomenal ramping up of logistics and distribution capabilities. To his second point, he is absolutely right that, from about 1% of PPE being manufactured in the UK before the pandemic, we now have the capacity to manufacture about 70% of the PPE it is currently assessed we need in this country. That is a great British success story.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): What is absolutely clear from Exercise Cygnus is that the specific recommendations on PPE were not implemented by the Government. That led to the massive rush to purchase PPE during the pandemic. That added to the problem; it was not the only reason for it. The Government's defence on the scandals of the contracts seems to be that we had to act very quickly. If that is the case, it does not explain why a

disproportionate number of the contracts ended up in the hands of people who were members of the Conservative party, close associates of members of the Conservative party, or had given money to the Conservative party. If you were casting your net far and wide, you would not expect that to come to light, would you? You would expect there to be quite a wide number of contracts being issued. So the Government's excuse does not hold water, does it?

Edward Argar: I take the hon. Gentleman's point about speed and the context in which we were operating. I have to say all contracts were assessed through an eight-stage process undertaken by neutral civil servants. As the National Audit Office found, Ministers were not involved in the award of contracts.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): As a chartered accountant, I am au fait with the concept of an accounting write down and the scale of this one really does indicate reckless waste. I am sure that, in my constituency of North Shropshire, the £9.7 billion carelessly wasted could have been put to better use. It could have been used to tackle the extremely high ambulance waiting times, to help the local accident and emergency tackle the huge challenges it faces in getting patients through, or to deal with the £50 million black hole that social care in Shropshire is facing in two years' time. Across the country, the story is very much the same. Local health services are struggling to find the money to deal with those issues. I am sure Members across the House know those issues all too well. That is why £9.7 billion wasted on PPE is so shocking. What are the Government doing to allocate resources to sufficiently recover that money?

Edward Argar: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place. I do not think I have had the opportunity to respond to a question or a speech from her previously, so I congratulate her, slightly belatedly, on her election and welcome her to this place. I will just correct one thing. She mentioned £9.7 billion. The sum involved is actually £8.7 billion.

To the hon. Lady's point, first, it is not wasted. As I made clear, it purchased PPE. There is a small amount in these accounts which has been made clear. The shadow Secretary of State said that it was snuck out. If I recall, I tabled a written ministerial statement to draw attention to these issues to be open and transparent with the House, as I always endeavour to be. We did whatever was needed at the time, in the context of the highly inflated pricing in the midst of a global pandemic.

More broadly, the hon. Lady touched on NHS funding and pressures. I appreciate that she was not a Member of this House at the time, but this Government have put in record funding for our NHS. One of the first Acts after the 2019 election enshrined in law a £33.9 billion increase by 2023-24, and we are also putting in place the health and care levy to both assist our NHS and provide that sustainable footing for social care in the future. I acknowledge entirely that she was not a Member of this House, so it would be wrong to draw any inference as to how she may have voted, but I want to put that record investment on the record.

I also gently say that the Liberals' stance on this issue shows, even by their standards, a degree of political contortion and a stretching of credibility. I think I am the only Member who has been a Health Minister

throughout this pandemic, and I recall them desperately calling in 2020 for whatever it took to get and buy more PPE to protect the frontline. I agreed with that stance, but now they are suggesting that the Government got it wrong by prioritising whatever it took to get the PPE that the frontline needed.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister has said that we were prepared for all eventualities, but I think he knows that the truth is that that was not the case. As illustrated in comments by Members across the House, we did not plan ahead sufficiently for what was needed in a pandemic.

The Minister said in his statement that 97% of the PPE ordered was suitable for use. Obviously, that means that 3% was not. He also said that the Government are actively seeking to recover costs from suppliers where possible in those cases. Does he not realise that that is a very weak way of responding to that challenge? What safeguards were put in place in those contracts, and will he publish for the House updated data on suppliers that are not refunding the taxpayer—suppliers that took public funds and did not deliver the goods?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for asking a sensible and serious question. We have already recovered, through prevention or termination of contracts, £157 million of potential fraud. We continue, with our anti-fraud unit, to look into a number of contracts where there is either a contractual dispute or a risk of fraud. There are contractual mechanisms for reconciling or trying to manage situations in which both parties have different interpretations of whether what was delivered is what was ordered. We are already looking into more than 100 contracts in that respect. As those investigations develop, I hope I will be able to update the House further, but it necessarily takes time to have conversations with contractors through those contract dispute mechanisms and to investigate. I hope that, as we are able to bring forward more information, we will make it available to the House.

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): Good afternoon, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can the Minister confirm whether any of the promised £350 million a week advertised on the side of a bus as a benefit of leaving the European Union has been used to purchase PPE for the NHS?

Edward Argar: The NHS and the Department get their annual budgets and spend them on what is necessary to meet the health and care needs of the nation. On the

hon. Gentleman's specific point, he might characterise the £33.9 billion increase by 2023-24, which we have enshrined in law, as part of the Brexit dividend.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): And finally, I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to ask a question in this House, at whatever time, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I thank the Minister and the Government for their endeavours during the pandemic? I do not think that anybody in this House does not recognise that, without the Government's initiatives, these things would not have happened.

I understand the pressure that the Department of Health and Social Care was under at the outset of the pandemic to ensure that staff were not taking their lives in their own hands when they entered hospital. But Minister, reports of £8.7 billion losses are astounding. Will there be a full investigation into the scale of loss and the reasons for the loss? I understand the problems at that time—I really do—but think of the good that that money could have done to address waiting lists and new cancer drugs. Minister, what has happened grieves me in my heart, and I suspect it grieves you in your heart—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Please will the hon. Gentleman not call the Minister "you"? It is my ambition that he will one day get this right—please, please.

Jim Shannon: It grieves me in my heart, and I suspect that it grieves the Minister in his heart as well.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. I have made it clear throughout that our priority was getting the PPE that we needed to give that protection and to save lives but, equally, every pound of taxpayers' money is valuable. Where fraud or failure to deliver contracts is evidenced, we will go after that money, quite rightly, and seek to recoup it for the taxpayer.

On the amount that is, for want of a better way of putting it, lost through goods not being fit for use, that is £673 million, but that is what we are investigating through those contract dispute resolution mechanisms and through anti-fraud work. The other amounts of money in here did purchase PPE, which was delivered and which we have. Different settings require different standards of PPE, so some that was purchased may not be of the standard for the NHS but can be used elsewhere. We are exploring all options to make sure that the PPE we have, where it can be, is used.

Northern Ireland Border

1.26 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I would like to update the House on current developments regarding the implementation of sanitary and phytosanitary checks at points of entry in Northern Ireland.

Yesterday, Minister Edwin Poots directed his officials in the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to suspend checks on points of entry for goods from Great Britain from midnight last night. There have been no operational changes on the ground as yet while officials in DAERA seek further advice in response to the direction provided by Minister Poots yesterday.

Although the overarching responsibility for international relations rests with the United Kingdom Government, delivering many of the requirements under the Northern Ireland protocol, including agrifood checks, is a devolved matter and responsibility for doing so falls to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in the Northern Ireland Executive. This includes checks that take place at Northern Ireland points of entry.

I spoke to Minister Poots this morning to gain an understanding of his perspective. He explained that he had taken his own legal advice before issuing the direction to officials. He also explained that he had hoped to secure an opportunity for the Northern Ireland Executive to discuss the situation regarding the current implementation of SPS checks at points of entry.

Since the end of the transition period, Minister Poots has been consistent in arguing that the Northern Ireland protocol creates significant challenges for communities in Northern Ireland. The Government recognise that the Northern Ireland protocol is causing significant problems in its current form, which is why we published a command paper last summer setting out an alternative approach to arrangements in Northern Ireland.

We have proposed new arrangements to provide the EU with the assurance that it has requested for its own single market without the need for export health certificates or routine checks at points of entry. Negotiations between my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and Vice-President Šefčovič are continuing, with a further meeting scheduled for later this afternoon. Throughout these talks, our clear priority is to preserve peace and stability in Northern Ireland and to protect the Belfast/Good Friday agreement in all of its dimensions.

The Government recognise the sensitivities that surround the Northern Ireland protocol within communities in Northern Ireland. That is why we continue to represent the interests of Northern Ireland in our discussions with the European Commission and, in the meantime, my officials will continue to liaise with officials in DAERA to support them while we seek a solution.

1.29 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I shall not wholly thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, because it arrived in my hand as he got to his feet, but I certainly thank him for making an effort to get it into my possession. We are, again, in a position where the Government are trying to ignore the reality that it was

the Prime Minister who negotiated every single word of the Northern Ireland protocol. He told this House that what he had delivered was

“in perfect conformity with the Good Friday agreement”—[*Official Report*, 19 October 2019; Vol. 666, c. 583.]

and he told the public that it would

“bring to an end far too many years of argument and division”, but here we are.

The same Government are now arguing that upholding the terms of the deal that they negotiated is not even the responsibility of the United Kingdom Government. Instead, they want us to believe that it is a function of the Northern Ireland Executive. In the last week, the Foreign Secretary and the Northern Ireland Secretary said that the Irish sea border checks are a

“matter for the Northern Ireland Executive”.

The protocol was signed into international law by the UK Government, and now they are bystanders as their deal falls apart, pathetically claiming that it is all somebody else’s responsibility. Let us think of the implications. Is the message that the Welsh Senedd or the Scottish Parliament can break international law too and the Government will have nothing to say about it? It is another piece of vandalism committed against our Union by a reckless Government too busy partying to notice what is going on out there in the real world.

A few moments ago, the Prime Minister’s spokesman said that they had been caught completely unaware by developments—are they kidding? I do not know anyone who did not see it coming. The Foreign Secretary is today negotiating with our EU partners. Does the Secretary of State believe that the events that are unfolding will strengthen her hand in negotiations as she seeks to reassure our partners that we are a credible partner who will stick to our end of negotiations and commitments?

Last year, the Secretary of State wrote to the Northern Ireland Executive to instruct them that work on border control posts must progress “without delay”. He used his powers to do so. The same principles stand today—the same Stormont Minister, the same Conservative Environment Secretary, the same Prime Minister’s deal—but there is a completely different interpretation of parliamentary sovereignty and Government responsibility. That is a total U-turn. Can the Secretary of State tell us what has changed in the Government’s position between now and then?

The situation puts civil servants and council workers in an impossible position. We are already hearing of confusion at ports. Right now, business groups are disagreeing with the Government’s stance. Yesterday, Manufacturing Northern Ireland said:

“Regardless of events, the legal and administrative advice is that these are international obligations on traders and they should continue to meet those obligations whether or not there’s a guy with a hi-vis to greet them at the Port.”

Does the Secretary of State agree with that statement and, therefore, encourage businesses to adhere to the protocol terms? They need a definitive answer.

The Labour party acknowledges issues with the protocol, which is why we fought for a better deal in the first place. There has been positive movement on how it works in the last year and concessions have been made by both sides. Progress has been achieved and more is within reach, but the Government must do more. Can the Secretary of State give us an update on progress with the veterinary partnership agreement?

As the Opposition have acknowledged many times in this House, peace in Northern Ireland is fragile and has been hard-won. Successive Prime Ministers, including John Major, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, all secured progress by being the honest broker that the people of Northern Ireland need. The current one, however, is setting us back by exacerbating divisions and damaging the Union.

Because of the Government's actions, people across the UK face a cost of living nightmare. On top of that, we are being plunged back into the Brexit quagmire totally unnecessarily. The Labour party would diligently negotiate a position where people and businesses across the United Kingdom can focus on future opportunities, freeing us from Tory failures that do nothing more than trap us in the battles of the past.

George Eustice: The hon. Gentleman asks about the Northern Ireland protocol, which he will know required that any checks that might be put in place should protect trade within the United Kingdom and should not lead to an unnecessary diversion of trade. That is a key principle of the Northern Ireland protocol. Many of the details as to precisely how any checks would be carried out were deferred in the first instance to the Joint Committee, which completed its work and reached some interim arrangements. It was always understood that the talks would need to continue.

The principle behind the Northern Ireland protocol was to try to protect the provisions of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, which requires us to protect all communities in Northern Ireland. It is built on the principle of the consent of all communities and the principle of power sharing. The hon. Gentleman is right that the United Kingdom takes the lead role when it comes to international agreements—which is why my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is now leading the discussions with her opposite number in the European Commission to resolve some of these issues—but matters such as SPS and agrifood issues are devolved to the Northern Ireland Executive.

For the reasons I explained earlier, Edwin Poots had sought the agreement of the Northern Ireland Executive, or a discussion with the Northern Ireland Executive, following a particular EU audit that took place last year and implied that individual passenger cars should sometimes be searched to look for food items in people's personal luggage. His concern was that that would cause difficulties for the very principles of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. That is why, he says, he sought some authority from the Northern Ireland Executive. He has made it clear that he still intends to bring a discussion of the matter before the Northern Ireland Executive.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland could use reserved powers to issue directions and so on. As he will understand, the bar for such an intervention is high, and rightly so, and is entirely unnecessary at this stage: the checks are continuing and there is currently no change. Yes, a direction has been issued and officials in DAERA are taking their own legal advice, as accounting officers, on elements related to that. We very much hope that, in the first instance, implementation can be delivered in its right and proper place through the Northern Ireland Executive.

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I support the Government's negotiations with the EU on improving the protocol, but will my right hon. Friend clarify that for the civil servants in Northern Ireland who are implementing the current rules his letter still stands? We cannot be a country that agrees an agreement and then does not stand behind it. In the absence of the Executive, which looks to be in a difficult position today, the British Government have to back the letter of 1 April and support the civil servants in Northern Ireland who are doing the checks.

George Eustice: My right hon. Friend was very involved in discussions on and elements of this matter and has a great deal of experience of navigating the politics of Northern Ireland and the community tensions there, but at this particular stage the officials in DAERA are taking legal advice, so we are not yet at the position of having to consider any kind of direction in the way that he suggests. In the first instance, we would all agree that it would be preferable if the Northern Ireland Executive reached a resolution to this issue on their own terms and found an ability to discuss it.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. Let us be clear why we are discussing this issue: because the current occupant of the most notorious party flat in central London has persistently and simultaneously promised contradictory outcomes in respect of border arrangements between GB and the single market, in the hope that others might eventually develop the same kind of casual attachment that he clearly has to the arrangements into which he enters.

Although, by contrast with the economy of GB alone, the economy of Northern Ireland prospers with its dual membership of the UK single market and the European single market, that clearly comes at some cost to east-west trade frictions and, of course, all the political symbolism that entails. Of course, we could legitimately, lawfully and immediately eliminate the problems of sanitary and phytosanitary checks by entering into a direct agreement with the European Union on these matters, which would be hugely beneficial to all parts of the UK. On television last night, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland appeared to try to subcontract responsibility for complying with these aspects of international law in respect of the current protocol solely to the Northern Ireland Executive, and this statement does much the same.

What will the UK Government do to ensure that the UK continues to adhere to its international obligations under the protocol, into which they entered freely? In the Secretary of State's understanding, from which legal authority should civil servants and, indeed, Ministers of the Crown in Northern Ireland take advice on how to act?

George Eustice: As I said earlier, Minister Poots has taken legal advice. Under the constitutional arrangements in Northern Ireland, I understand that he is entitled to issue this direction. The Northern Ireland civil service and DAERA are taking separate legal advice relating to some of the accounting officer issues, and Minister Poots understands why they would want to do that.

On the hon. Gentleman's wider point, I come back to what I said previously. The agreement on the Northern Ireland protocol required many things, including that there should be no disruption and no unnecessary checks

[George Eustice]

that would cause problems for trade within the UK, which is why there are still grounds for us to try to resolve some of these issues constructively. That is why my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary continues to have discussions with the European Commission on this particular point.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I have confidence in and admiration for my right hon. Friend, but I am somewhat disappointed that this matter is being treated as some kind of technical problem when it is actually a constitutional crisis. He says the Northern Ireland Executive should seek to resolve it but, under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Northern Ireland Executive resolves matters by agreeing things between the power-sharing parties. They fundamentally disagree on this matter because the Northern Ireland protocol is, in fact, incompatible with the Good Friday agreement. The protocol is also incompatible with the Act of Union, because it has been ruled that it supersedes the Act of Union. And the European Union says there are not enough checks taking place.

Is it not now clear that the Northern Ireland protocol is unfit for purpose and is not delivering on what it said on the tin, which is that it would strengthen and underpin the Good Friday agreement? It needs to be scrapped and replaced by something completely different, and the EU should agree to that. The EU is the only party that has threatened to put infrastructure on the border in Northern Ireland, and we should keep reminding the EU that it is the one threatening the peace in Northern Ireland.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and it is why the UK Government have engaged in negotiations with the European Union to seek important changes. We are motivated solely by our commitment to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. In so far as the implementation and the interpretation of the Northern Ireland protocol by the European Union to date is incompatible with the principles of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, all parties should seek to adopt a more sensible interpretation that brings it back into line with the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. That is what we are endeavouring to do.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Parties have warned for months that there will be a crisis, so no one should be surprised that there is a crisis. I am disappointed by the shadow Minister's comments, as what he put to the Government today is not honest brokering. This is a serious crisis; it is not about parties in Downing Street.

The Secretary of State says that Minister Poots is entitled to take this advice, which told him that the checks are not lawful. Sinn Féin will not allow a discussion about this in the Executive to try to repair them and make them lawful. Minister Poots therefore has no vires to continue with the operation of the checks. If that is the case, will the Secretary of State affirm that Her Majesty's Government will not interfere in this process? Will Her Majesty's Government accept that they must now remove the friction between GB companies and Northern Ireland, as that is where the main problem now rests?

George Eustice: I would express it slightly differently, but would say this: the rationale Minister Poots has advanced is that the EU audit that took place and

whose findings were published at the end of last year raised some issues that he believed were contentious and therefore potentially a threat to community relations. Therefore, in his view, part of the threshold test for authorisation to be required by the Northern Ireland Executive has been met. He therefore believes that there should be a discussion; to date, under the power-sharing agreement there has not been agreement that it should be discussed, and that has led to the current state of affairs. So it is too early to say what the legal position is. I know it is the position of Edwin Poots that it is not lawful to continue these checks without the express authority of the Northern Ireland Executive. Others may take a different view, but the UK Government very much hope the Northern Ireland Executive can find a resolution to this, and for our part, as the ones who stand behind the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and are responsible for it and for protecting it, and as the ones who are responsible for international negotiations, we will continue to endeavour through the negotiations with the EU to find an enduring solution.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): My right hon. Friend rightly characterises this as a devolved matter, and the Government, far from making a U-turn, have been very clear and consistent about it. However, the international law dimension of this and the obligations of the United Kingdom Government are also very clear. Would it not have been better for the Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive to have told my right hon. Friend before he decided to make this directive because of the obvious sensitivities and the vital importance of allowing my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary to conduct her negotiations with Commissioner Šefčovič in as smooth and unimpeded a way as possible? We will deal with this through negotiation and resolution at international level, and therefore we need to avoid the elephant traps that unilateral action presents.

George Eustice: My right hon. and learned Friend knows from experience that the UK Government have considerable patience for negotiation in order to reach agreement and sensible pragmatic settlements in these areas. He is absolutely right that we seek and would prefer a negotiated reform of the way the protocol is interpreted, and that is what my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is working on, but I hope I have given an explanation on a number of occasions now about the perspective that Edwin Poots brings to this and why he has acted in the way that he has. I hope my right hon. and learned Friend will also understand that there is a difference between things we are responsible for in international law and things a devolved Administration are responsible for implementing under the devolved devolution settlement that we have.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): It should be a cause of great sadness to all that the act of leaving the EU continues to cause such business and political instability in Northern Ireland. I have listened very carefully to what the Secretary of State had to say and think he was arguing that, while it may indeed be the case that the administration of SPS checks is a matter for the Northern Ireland Executive, the legal obligation under the withdrawal agreement and Northern Ireland protocol to ensure checks are done falls upon the UK Government. So, if the checks do stop, do the Government intend to use

their powers under section 26 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998? He talked about a high bar; may I briefly read to him what it says?

“If the Secretary of State considers that any action proposed to be taken by a Minister or Northern Ireland department would be incompatible with any international obligations...he may by order direct that the proposed action shall not be taken.”

George Eustice: Of course the Secretary of State may direct, as the right hon. Gentleman points out, but for all the reasons I have given—for all the reasons that we understand—the bar for using such reserve powers is high. At the moment, checks are continuing. There is no breach, and the Government judge that at this stage, the right thing to do is appeal to the power-sharing Executive in Northern Ireland to find a way through this.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): As someone with a large Northern Irish population in Wolverhampton, and being half Northern Irish myself, I have grave concerns about the constitutional crisis that the protocol is causing. Will the Secretary of State commit to urgently reviewing this, to come to a solution that will fully restore and maintain Northern Ireland's position in our Union? Does he also agree that a Labour solution that would align us back with the EU regulations is absolutely unacceptable?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. The Government stand absolutely full square behind the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, which is built on the principle of consent within the communities in Northern Ireland. It respects the role of Northern Ireland within the UK and the importance of unfettered trade between GB and Northern Ireland as a component part of the UK, and I assure my hon. Friend that the Government are absolutely committed to finding a solution. That is why my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary continues to endeavour to get a sensible resolution to this issue.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): The protocol exists due to the choices made by this Government about the nature of Brexit, and in order to protect the very particular circumstances faced in Northern Ireland. I want to make it very clear that it is already the policy of the devolved Executive from May 2020 that the checks be implemented, and the legal adviser to the Executive is the current Attorney General, not the former Attorney General. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need to find long-term, sustainable and legal pragmatic solutions to the issues with SPS, and also with customs? If we are asking the European Union to subcontract more and more functions around the marginal checks to the UK authorities, trust is essential, and anything that undermines trust is entirely counter-productive.

George Eustice: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Northern Ireland protocol had a number of requirements, including that there should not be unnecessary checks on goods going from GB to Northern Ireland, ensuring that that trade could continue, and ensuring that the principles of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement in all its dimensions were respected. That is why the UK Government are seeking some changes and modifications to the way in which it is interpreted. Finally, it is not for

the European Commission to unilaterally interpret what the Northern Ireland protocol means: its interpretation must be bilaterally agreed.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Two years on from Brexit and seven months on from the Command Paper, which made it clear that there were sufficient requirements for article 16 to be triggered, with continued disruption to trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and with completely unnecessary checks, does the Secretary of State share my hope that the action taken today in Northern Ireland might be the wake-up call that the European Union needs to finally realise that the protocol is undermining the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, and that it should negotiate its replacement sooner rather than later?

George Eustice: We have consistently made clear through our negotiations with the European Union that the UK Government are motivated on this issue solely by our defence of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. It is because we want to stand behind it and protect the peace that the Belfast/Good Friday agreement has brought that we seek the changes to the Northern Ireland protocol.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The author of this present problem is the Prime Minister. At a time when Northern Ireland is looming into a real crisis, not simply because of the actions of Edwin Poots but because of the threat to collapse the Northern Ireland Executive, it is incumbent on the Prime Minister to be engaged, and it is disappointing that he is not. Will the Secretary of State undertake to go back and say to the Prime Minister that it is time for him to demonstrate real determination to sort out the overall problem of the protocol?

George Eustice: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Prime Minister is absolutely engaged in these issues, as are the Northern Ireland Secretary and the Foreign Secretary. Those of us who were in the last Parliament can all recall that finding a resolution to this particular challenge around trade between GB and Northern Ireland was a difficult problem to solve. The Northern Ireland protocol had a solution, but it required both parties to continue to work through certain details to make it work in practice, and that is what we have been doing.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Following on from what the Secretary of State has just said, is it not extraordinary that 20% of the checks that the EU has with third countries are between Great Britain and Northern Ireland? It is even more crazy, because the vast majority of those goods are circulating within the UK single market. Will he give the House an assurance that he will always put the interests of Northern Ireland above the interests of the EU?

George Eustice: Through the Joint Committee process and the negotiations led by the then Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), we secured easements for the major retailers in particular, and other arrangements that set aside the requirement for export health certificates until a more durable solution could be found. It is the case, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) says, that the European Union has a very legalistic approach to the proportion of goods that it

[George Eustice]

inspects, which bears no resemblance whatsoever to the degree of risk. The UK Government think that there is no sense in such an approach, and our own future border arrangements will be based on a calibrated assessment of risk, not on an arbitrary percentage figure plucked out of the sky.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I am sure the Minister is aware that the Good Friday agreement, which has been much referred to here today, rests upon the principle of consent, and that controversial issues therefore have to be dealt with on a cross-party basis. That was embodied in the law that set up the Assembly; the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires that to happen, but it has not happened in this case. The Minister will also be aware that it has not happened in relation to the border posts, which have not been built yet because consent could not be achieved, and that it has not been implemented in relation to the charging of lorries coming through those border posts, because there was no consent on that either. This principle is well established, so instead of listening to the EU cheerleaders in the Labour party, the Alliance party and the Social Democratic and Labour party who want full implementation of this damaging Northern Ireland protocol, would the Secretary of State agree that the real responsibility lies with the EU to stop using Northern Ireland as a whipping boy for the UK leaving the EU, and to treat us with the respect we deserve as a part of the United Kingdom?

George Eustice: As I said earlier, Minister Poots gave me a similar description of the requirements of consent, and his understanding is that this issue should have been discussed and agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive. On the right hon. Gentleman's wider points, although I would express them rather differently, I have not been known for listening to EU cheerleaders during my political career.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): The DUP is executing a series of reckless stunts today to try to regain some political memorandum and distract from the terrible mess that it has made, but removing officials and collapsing the Executive solves nothing. It damages trust, it undermines the culture of lawfulness that many of us are trying to foster and it risks vital legislation on climate, education and many other things that have been left hanging since the last governance black hole. I believe that it will also prevent the Executive from spending the money announced in this Chamber today to mitigate rising fuel prices. It is very disturbing that the UK Government seem content to shrug their shoulders and collude with this. What is the Minister's clear message to businesses today, including those large retailers that are sending goods into Northern Ireland? Is it that they should continue to follow the legally mandated rules as outlined in the trade and co-operation agreement and the protocol, or should they collude with this stunt and undermine international law?

George Eustice: On the latter point, the legal obligations that exist apply to the relevant authorities, whether that is the UK Government or indeed the Northern Ireland

Executive, so businesses should continue as normal. There is no legal liability to businesses for continuing to trade with Northern Ireland under any circumstances. On the former point, I hope that I have made it clear in everything I have said that the UK Government hope that the Northern Ireland Executive will continue and that they will pull together and find a resolution to this problem. That is the right thing to do.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): This is really the most farcical of situations among a number of farcical situations. It seems to me that what the Minister is saying here today is that everything is as was and as normal and traders can continue. Mr Poots seems to have lawyers; I wonder whether the Government's lawyers are involved in any of this. It seems to me that the Government are involved in wishful thinking, following on from the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) about what happens next. Can the Minister tell us what is plan B?

George Eustice: I am here to give the House an update on the current situation, which I am doing in all the detail that I am able to. If events change, I am sure there will be an opportunity to have further such exchanges.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I do not agree with all the points made by the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), but on one point he was correct. This is not an operational issue but a constitutional one. Can we expect a further statement from the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on all the points raised around that matter today?

George Eustice: I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has been engaged in these matters over the past week or so as events have been developing. I am sure that there will be many opportunities for the Northern Ireland Office to bring such statements before the House should there be anything new to report.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the people of Northern Ireland have been kept in the call waiting queue for long enough? We hear continual EU platitudes that our opinions are important, while they simply entrench further into the protocol. We are determined that now is the time for the call to be taken, for our voice to be heard, for our problems to be addressed and for justice and UK parity to be restored. Does he agree that since the EU and its government have continued to stall, there are now no options available to the people of Northern Ireland other than major steps that were a last resort and are now the only resort?

George Eustice: The Government have been clear throughout that, where there are legitimate grounds to use article 16 of the withdrawal agreement, we reserve our right to do so. We also, as I said earlier, have considerable patience for a negotiated outcome. Our preference is still to get that negotiated outcome. That is why my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will be having further conversations this afternoon.

Points of Order

2.3 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On the front page of *The Daily Telegraph* yesterday, I was surprised but pleased to read that the Government intend to extend or make permanent the current legal approval that allows women to undergo early medical abortions at home. I was pleased because this is a welcome development based on strong clinical evidence and the opinion and experience of women who have needed access to abortion during the pandemic. I was surprised because I have not seen an announcement anywhere in the business of the House, a written ministerial statement or any promise of business in the coming weeks, and I am mindful of what Mr Speaker said about Government announcements being made first to the House. The current approval expires at the end of March, and the Government have had a year since they closed the consultation on the matter to place a decision before the House. Have you received notice of a statement on this topic, or will women have to rely on *The Daily Telegraph* for information about access to their essential healthcare?

Secondly, Madam Deputy Speaker, if you will indulge me, in business questions today I referenced the morning-after pill. I made a perfectly, as I understand it, orderly request for a debate on access to contraception. In response, the Leader of the House made a misinformed comment about abortion. The World Health Organisation states:

“Emergency contraceptive pills prevent pregnancy by preventing or delaying ovulation and they do not induce an abortion... Emergency contraception cannot interrupt an established pregnancy or harm a developing embryo.”

How can I ensure that the Leader of the House corrects the record, as I think that what he said is a harmful clinical falsehood that I am sure does not represent the Government's policy?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the right hon. Lady. She has elided two points of order. Let me take her second point first. What a

Minister says at the Dispatch Box is, of course, not a matter for the Chair, and I have no authority to correct the Minister. However, if a Minister has inadvertently given information that is not absolutely correct, the right hon. Lady will be aware of the many ways in which she can ask for that Minister to be required to come back and correct the record. Indeed, it is open to her simply to ask that Minister to correct the record. It appears to me that if there is a factual inaccuracy in the matter to which the right hon. Lady has just referred, it is rather important. It is a matter about which I would judge that anything that is said in this Chamber should be 100% correct, because it is not a matter on which we should allow people who would be affected by it to be misled. The facts ought to be straight and I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for bringing that matter to the House's attention. I hope that Members on the Treasury Bench have noted what she has said and that the message will be passed on to the Leader of the House.

The right hon. Lady's first point is much simpler. Mr Speaker has made it clear on many occasions—and I have echoed it many times—that announcements about significant matters of Government policy must be made first to this Chamber, so that the duly elected representatives of the people of this country, not the press, are the people who question the Minister. If the right hon. Lady would like to pursue that matter, I am quite sure that Mr Speaker will look favourably upon her request.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. When at-home abortion medication was issued by the Government, it was because of a crisis due to covid. Now that the crisis is coming to an end, have the Government given any indication to the Chair that they intend to bring forward measures to remove those medications as crisis medications?

Madam Deputy Speaker: No, the Government have not at this point given notice of an intention to bring that matter before the House. As I said to the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), if the hon. Gentleman wishes to pursue the matter, I am sure that Mr Speaker will take his request seriously.

Backbench Business

Government's Education Catch-up and Mental Health Recovery Programmes

2.8 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effectiveness of the Government's education catch-up and mental health recovery programmes.

I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) for coming to the Backbench Business Committee to secure the debate. The impact of covid-19 on education has been nothing short of a national disaster for our children. Lockdowns and school closures for most children have heralded the four horsemen of the education apocalypse: a widening attainment gap, a mental health epidemic, increased safeguarding hazards and damage to life chances. Even prior to the pandemic, disadvantaged pupils were already 18 months of learning behind their better-off peers by the time of GCSEs, and only yesterday *The Times* newspaper, as part of its education commission, reported that 25% fewer poorer pupils achieve English and maths GCSEs compared with their wealthier peers.

Today I would like to focus on three key issues affecting children's recovery. First, I will start with the ghost children. On Sunday, the respected Centre for Social Justice published a new report, "Lost but not forgotten", which continues to highlight the worrying situation of the over 100,000 children—and the number is increasing—who have mostly not returned to school since schools were reopened last year. Across the country, 758 schools are missing almost an entire class-worth of children. About 500 children are missing in half of all local authorities across the country. The Government want exams to go ahead, which I agree with, but 13,000 children in a critical exam year

"are most likely to be severely absent."

As my Education Committee heard from a headteacher last week:

"Pupils need to be physically in school to even start to learn."

However, the effects of persistent absence go well beyond academic progress. The CSJ again points out that while "school attendance is not a panacea, it...offers opportunities to detect wrongdoing and intervene much earlier."

This would prevent safeguarding concerns from escalating and would provide the families with the support they need when they need it. We only need to remember the tragic cases of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson to realise this truth.

Of course, I welcome the Government's recent announcements

"to tackle the postcode lottery of avoidable absence",

but this is no way near enough. The Department for Education must prioritise gathering live data about who and where these children are—the data is absolutely crucial—and I urge the Government to use any underspend from the national tutoring programme, as the Centre for Social Justice has recommended, to fund 2,000 attendance advisers to work on the ground to find these children, work with the families and get the children back into school. Charles Dickens wrote in "Oliver Twist"

"of so many things forgotten, and so many more which might have been repaired!"

We must do much more to save this "Oliver Twist" generation of ghost children, who are out in the streets and facing safeguarding hazards, including joining county line gangs, and facing online harms at home and possible high-pressure home situations such as domestic abuse. If we do nothing or we do not do enough, we will be haunted by these ghost children forever.

Secondly, we must consider the efficacy of the Government's education catch-up programmes. I strongly welcome the catch-up programmes—I campaigned for them for literally the year during lockdown—and I welcome the £5 billion invested in education recovery, but my key worry is that the funding, however welcome, is not reaching the most vulnerable children in our communities.

The national tutoring programme is falling short of its targets: 524,000 children were supposed to start tutoring this year, but only 8% have begun. The Education Policy Institute has found that there has been a marked disparity in the take-up of the national tutoring programme between the north and the south. In the north just 50% of schools engaged with the national tutoring programme, whereas in the south upwards of 96% of schools engaged with the programme. In December, the Department published its own annual report evidencing that the Government believe the risk that their catch-up programme will fail to recover lost learning is "Critical/very likely". That is a direct quote from the Department's own annual report.

Headteachers and tutoring groups have described to us the inaccessibility of the hub, and the lack of quality assurance about the tutors on offer. Yesterday, I did a roundtable with heads from university technical colleges—an initiative I am incredibly supportive of—and the principal of Aston University Sixth Form in Birmingham said that, despite receiving about £60,000 of recovery funding and an offer of three NTP tutors, as of yesterday just one had started, and it is now forced to resort to expensive private tutoring. The NTP has the potential to be a really great intervention by the Government to support children's recovery, but it is not going far enough or happening quickly enough. I strongly urge the Minister to look again at the contract and seriously consider enacting the break clause and working with Randstad to up its game or literally say goodbye.

However, recovery is not just about academic catch-up. We need to look at other measures to support pupils. I welcome the pilot scheme in Wales on extending the school day, in which 14 primary and secondary schools will trial an additional five hours of bespoke activities in art, music, sport and core academic sessions. Let me be clear: when I say we should consider extending the school day, I am not talking about pupils sitting through eight more hours of algebra, although the Minister would probably like that. Instead, as in Wales, a longer school day should be used to support enrichment and extracurricular activities, which have been proven to support academic attainment.

The Education Policy Institute found that a longer school day could increase educational attainment by two to three months. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport found that an extended school day can boost numeracy skills by 29%. Young people who participate in school clubs are 20% less likely to suffer from mental health problems. Why cannot the Government at least consider implementing a pilot for longer school

days, as Wales has done, to help to give disadvantaged children in England the best chance of closing the gap with their peers?

Thirdly, we must address the challenges with children's mental health. Like the Minister, I go to schools in my constituency and all over the place, and I am struck again and again, when speaking to students, that they talk about mental health in a way I have not heard over the past few years. That has been hugely caused by the damage of lockdown and shutting schools, which we must never, ever do again.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the important points he is making. On the issue of mental health, this week the all-party parliamentary group on pandemic response and recovery had evidence from psychologists of long standing in the field, indicating that one of the greatest causes of stress and mental health problems in young children at school was the continual testing that takes place for covid. Does he accept that, given the way the virus is now moving, we must look at whether such extensive testing is needed, evaluate its significance anyhow, and address this issue, which is putting many children off even wanting to go to school?

Robert Halfon: As so often, the right hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point. My view has always been that we seem to be putting burdens on children all the time, when they are at low risk—thank goodness—from covid, yet we do not do the same to adults. It is children who have really suffered during this pandemic. We have all let them down through some of the policies that have been implemented. I understand why that was done, but our children have really struggled, so I have sympathy for what he says.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I thank the Chair of the Education Committee for his excellent speech. I agree with him on many of the points he raises. As he knows, I chair the all-party parliamentary group for school exclusions and alternative provision, and we had a meeting just this morning with professionals in that area. There is a crisis in AP at the moment, due to the sheer numbers of young people who cannot be in mainstream education because of the crisis in mental health that he has just mentioned. Does he agree that it is critical that the Government find funding for high-quality AP and offer more guidance to local authorities on how to use their high needs block to ensure that those much-needed provisions are available now in local communities?

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Forty children are excluded every school day and, sadly, they are not ending up in quality alternative provision. There is a postcode lottery, despite the wonderful efforts of many teachers in AP. There needs to be a dramatic change. I would like kids to stay in the school but have support training centres in the school. As Michael Wilshaw, the former head of Ofsted, said to our Committee, there should be many more of them so that kids are not just dumped out into the streets and left, often, to their own devices or to poor-quality provision.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows that he and I have a slight difference of opinion when it comes to the idea of

exclusion. However, I always want to be careful about one thing: that we talk about what the school could do. Does he agree that there always needs to be a firm conversation about what more parents can do to support the teachers to ensure that their children do not end up being excluded?

Robert Halfon: Yes, 100%. I like the message coming out of the Department for Education that this is not just about schools and skills, but families, schools and skills. Families are central to this and we should do everything possible to strengthen them. I welcome the hundreds of millions of pounds that the Government are putting into early intervention, particularly to build family hubs around the country.

Let us look at the horrific statistics on mental health: 17.4% of children aged six to 16 had a probable mental health disorder in 2021, up from 11.6% in 2017. Overall, child mental health referrals are up by 60%, so the Government must rocket-boost their proposals to put a mental health professional in every school, not just in 25% of them. We should also ensure—this perhaps relates to some of the question from my hon. Friend—that interventions to support mental health are not seen as crutches, but designed to prevent more serious escalation.

I have mentioned before in this House my visit to Newham Collegiate Sixth Form Centre, which is an extraordinary school. Staff there do not like the words mental health; they talk about mental health resilience. Throughout school life, pupils are taught the tools and tactics that they need to deal with the challenges that life throws at them. Private study periods have desks set up in an exam style to help pupils to familiarise themselves with the setting to reduce their anxiety, and in school assemblies, pupils learn from sport celebrities about the techniques that they use to deal with high-pressure situations. We need to talk about this in terms of mental health resilience.

We should also tackle the wrecking ball that social media has been to young people's mental health. The Prince's Trust found that

“social media use in childhood is associated with worse wellbeing”, and 78% of Barnardo's practitioners reported that children between the ages of 10 and 15 have accessed unsuitable or harmful content. The platforms provided by companies such as TikTok, in my view—I am not a luddite; I love technology—are a Trojan horse for damaging children's lives, not just with their huge amount of sexualised content, but through the damage that they are doing because of the images that children see. There should be a 2% levy on these social media companies, which would create a funding pot of around £100 million that the Government could distribute to schools to provide mental health support and digital skills training to young people to build the resilience and online safety skills that they need.

I note my heartfelt thanks to all the teachers and support staff in my Harlow constituency and around the country for their heroic efforts throughout the pandemic to keep our children learning. There has been welcome investment in education recovery and some great work is happening, but there is much more to do. The Government must deal with the problem of ghost children to prevent the creation of the “Oliver Twist” generation that will potentially be forgotten forever. The Education Secretary has a real grip of his Department, and I

[Robert Halfon]

admire many of the things that he is doing, but he has to make sure that the catch-up recovery reaches the most disadvantaged pupils and works efficiently. Given the scale of the mental health challenges facing our young people, action has to be taken now to prevent this becoming an epidemic.

Finally, I say to the Minister that there are great initiatives coming out of the Department. The home education register, which we supported in our Committee and is recommended our report, is very welcome. Sometimes, however, the education system resembles a whole lot of clothes pegs without a washing line. We need the washing line—the narrative, the strategy, the Government's plans for education. This problem can be solved. The NHS has a long-term plan and a secure funding settlement; the Ministry of Defence has a strategic review and an additional £20 billion. I urge the Minister to ensure that education has a long-term plan and a secure funding settlement, so we can have that washing line. While many of the clothes pegs are great initiatives, we need a proper washing line to link them all together.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I expect this debate to take until about half-past three, so there is just over an hour left. I know that Members will want to leave enough time for the Minister to answer their questions and, indeed, for the shadow Minister to speak. I hope that we can manage without a formal time limit. If everyone takes about five minutes, everyone will have an opportunity to speak. If that does not work, I will introduce a time limit.

2.25 pm

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon). We have debated this and related issues before, but today's debate is particularly important to the life chances of our young constituents. If we believe in social mobility and trying to make things better for the next generation than they were for the last, this debate should be at the heart of those ambitions. I agree with a great deal of what the right hon. Gentleman has said, and accept that the Department, and indeed the Government in general, are making some movement in the direction in which I would like to see us go. Certainly there is common ground and much to be discussed between us.

As usual, these matters boil down to “but more needs to be done”. Let me briefly run through the issues that I think are at the heart of this. The education catch-up programme needs to reach into the schools. Eighty per cent. of schools in the north-east of England which responded to a recent survey—I accept that information on this is patchy—said that the Government's education recovery package was not sufficient to address the impact of the pandemic. More than half of them thought that the catch-up would take five years or more. Since the start of the pandemic, each pupil has had an average of 115 days out of school. The north-east of England saw the highest rise in absence compared with anywhere else in the country in the last year, and I therefore consider that our area ought to benefit from the highest response

in the form of countervailing measures to help us to catch up with more prosperous parts of the United Kingdom.

I believe that the Government should focus on three key issues to prevent further disruption. I will observe your strictures on brevity, Madam Deputy Speaker. Those issues are testing, classroom ventilation and vaccines.

Testing schoolchildren regularly is essential to ensure that the infected are isolated and pupils can carry on learning in person. I want to see the Government increase communication with parents to raise awareness of the latest testing guidance, and to work with schools by providing tests for pupils to take home and to promote uptake.

Ventilation may seem a prosaic issue, but I am convinced that it is not. I am not critical of what the Government have done in this respect, but I do think that the approach should be more holistic. For some time now, we have been urging the Government to get proper ventilation systems into schools and colleges. Quality learning requires a comfortable environment, not one in which students and staff must wear coats to keep warm in cold classrooms. The Government must increase the supply now, and ensure that every school is provided with an adequate ventilation system.

The vaccine programme is a key tool—it would even be reasonable to argue that it was the key tool—in preventing further disruption to education. About 2 million 12 to 17-year-olds remain unvaccinated. Some 16 weeks after the vaccine was approved, about half of 12 to 15-year-olds have still not received their first jab. The programme is way behind schedule. Again, I do not want to be critical, because I know that people are trying and doing their best, but as ever, more needs to be done. We need to ramp up the vaccination of pupils.

That is my key take on these issues, but I will also say a few words on the mental health recovery programme. We debated it recently, but the issue is growing. Young people have endured such a long period away from in-person learning, largely because of the pandemic. A recent YoungMinds survey found that two thirds of young people aged 13 to 25 believe that the pandemic will have a negative long-term impact on their mental health. We must do everything we can to ameliorate that.

Record pressures on mental health services cause many sufferers to turn to A&E as a last resort, but by that stage, the issues that require attention can be significant and complex. It is a relatively ineffective way of trying to deal with mental health problems, even if there is provision in the A&E, which there is not always. Earlier intervention is possible and would have significant benefits.

Some 50% of mental health disorders are present by the age of 14 and that increases to 75% by the age of 18, but the provision of mental health services in schools is patchy. As we have debated before, there is no legal requirement on schools in England, although there is in other parts of the United Kingdom. School-based counselling is a proven intervention for children and young people experiencing psychological distress. As well as making for better health outcomes, early intervention makes economic sense and ought to relieve pressure later down the line for the national health service.

There is a successful school-based counselling pilot, of which I am very proud, in the Newcastle upon Tyne East constituency. I enthusiastically commend it and

everyone involved, as I do the similar projects that are in place. The project's early results are encouraging: it finds an improvement in educational attainment for around one in three pupils who received counselling. I support demands to make school-based counselling services more consistent across the country.

The Minister's programme is moving towards my ideal outcome—so we are not so far apart—so at least we are talking about the same sort of thing. I back the Labour party's proposals to ensure that every school has specialist mental health support. If we were looking to spend money—I mean, are we looking to spend money?—to level up and help people, even perhaps because we believed in social mobility, surely the life chances of the very young would be the area in which to make a start. I am trying to build up the current picture of mental health support teams and how they work in practice with children, and the Minister generously offered us an opportunity to take that up with him when we have a meeting arranged.

I hope that my contribution to this important debate is accepted as being bipartisan and as an attempt to draw people together to make progress.

2.34 pm

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), who gave an excellent speech outlining the scale of the problem we are looking to solve.

In my two years and one month as the Member of Parliament for Bolsover, we have had many divisions and many changes to our country. However, what was hardest to support, and which I probably regret the most, was closing schools to the majority of pupils. Bolsover, as the "Levelling Up" White Paper outlined, is already behind the rest of Derbyshire and the east midlands. In hindsight, it is difficult to support what we did to schools and I think I speak for many hon. Members on that front.

The challenge for our schools, teachers and families, of finding a way through to catching up, is incredibly difficult. I echo my right hon. Friend's comments and thank all the teachers and headteachers who, over the past couple of years, have continued to go above and beyond. The scale of the challenge that headteachers face is as big now as it was then, because they continue to lose staff to omicron and so on. It is a constantly shifting jigsaw. We should not lose sight of the fact that they are trying to build a recovery on quicksand, because the situation is shifting so much at the moment.

One very positive development worth noting is that we are again talking about mental health. There has been a total transformation in society over the last 10 years or so in how open we are in discussing mental health. That is a massively positive thing. In recent weeks and months, I visited a number of my schools. The issues fed back to me on attainment, behaviour and mental health were notable. It is amazing how many of my primary schools said that when children, particularly the youngest, returned, they were unable to share space, toys and resources. That is a massive challenge because of covid. More than one headteacher has used the word "feral" to describe behaviour. Pupils returned in a state

which meant they really had to be managed in a completely different way and on a scale that schools have not had to do before.

I have seen various hugely impressive approaches to this issue. Bolsover Infant School has taken a back-to-basics approach and I saw last week how that is working. Palterton Primary School has just won an award for its use of physical education. One could see from the behaviour in the school that it was having a huge impact. Other creative ideas, such as the use of forest schools—I say that nervously, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) sits in front of me and does not like such things—have been used by Shirland Primary School and a primary school in Langwith. They have been shown to have a hugely positive impact.

This is the scale of the challenge: record high demands in NHS England data for accessing child mental health services; a 37% increase in child mental health service referrals between April 2020 and March 2021; and a 59% increase in referrals for children with eating disorders compared with previous years. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow said, there is a very clear division between where that does and does not happen. Those who are most affected are those from the worst backgrounds. We must not lose sight of that.

I appreciate that the Government, with £5 billion investment, are putting everything they can into catching up. Two days ago, Derbyshire was identified as an education investment area, which is a hugely important step. I note within that the provisions for additional sixth forms. I know the Minister is very keen to help me deliver a sixth form for my area, because we have no post-16 provision in my constituency. I have to say I did rather like the idea of a longer school day. That is a very good proposal and I am happy to have a go in Bolsover, but my headteachers may disagree.

I will, if I may, just finish by saying that I have had some feedback on the tutoring fund, which is that it is very difficult to make it work locally: there is either a lack of suppliers or some teachers are having to go on training, which takes them out of the classroom, making it a bit of a tick-box exercise. Some schools are even suggesting that they might give that funding back, which seems rather perverse to me. I would appreciate it if the Minister commented on that and could meet me to discuss that issue. The scale of the challenge facing schools and headteachers is incredibly difficult, but we do need to make sure that this is a priority, because areas such as Bolsover were already behind educationally and it is vital that we catch up, and that is a real challenge.

2.40 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Quite simply, this debate could not be any more important. The inaction of the Government in catching up the lost learning of our young people will be felt by many of them for a lifetime. Why is it that our children, teachers and schools have been treated as an afterthought at every stage of the pandemic? We have seen the Government: closing schools without a second thought for those pupils who could not log in or learn from home; opening schools back up for less than 24 hours to encourage the virus to run rife; and leaving every announcement until past even the 11th hour—whether it be on exams, on testing, on vaccines.

[Siobhain McDonagh]

When it comes to education, the contrast could not be starker. This Government think that they can cut corners on the months of lost learning, but, for Labour, education is so important that we say it three times. The catch-up programme does not even come close to meeting “the scale of the challenge.” Those are not my words, but the words of the Government’s own education recovery tsar whose resignation in June is all the evidence that anyone needs when considering whether the scale of the challenge is really understood. Sir Kevan’s essential proposals were watered down to the tune of less than 10% of the funding that he insisted was required. Why does the Minister think that this issue can be just brushed under the carpet?

While the Chancellor blocks the catch-up funding with one hand, he waves away wasted billions with another: £8.7 billion lost on PPE; £4.3 billion handed out to fraudsters; and a bonus £200 million thrown at the plans to downgrade St Helier Hospital to healthy, wealthy Belmont rather than keeping services where health is poorest.

We are eight months on since Sir Kevan’s damning indictment of the so-called catch-up plan. I take no satisfaction in saying that every word of his damning predictions has come true. It is a catch-up programme that is so inept that the national tutoring programme is even teaching to empty classrooms. An assistant headteacher at a school in Derby shockingly reports that her school was paying a tutor to sit with no pupils for an hour. It is scandalous. How is this possibly a good use of public funds, and how on earth does it help our young children to catch up? The failings are there for all to see. Only one in five headteachers in the north-east of England uses the programme. Many schools have found it impossible to enrol new children onto it, and the scheme is reaching less than 10% of its target pupil number. It is no wonder that tuition providers themselves have described it as shambolic.

Before lockdown, children on free school meals were leaving school 18 months behind their classmates and the gap was getting worse. Schools closed and a quarter of these children did less than one hour’s schoolwork a day. Lockdown was temporary but could have a lifelong impact, with the Institute of Fiscal Studies warning that students who had lost six months of schooling could see a reduction in lifetime income of 4%.

In primary schools, the unavoidable reality is of a covid gap of approximately two months’ learning in year 2 pupils and a widening of the disadvantage gap in attainment. Meanwhile, a quarter fewer poor pupils achieved English and maths GCSEs during the pandemic than their richer classmates, and the divide continues to grow.

There were 415,000 children off school with covid on 20 January, but only 2% of teachers working in schools, serving the most disadvantaged communities, said that all their pupils had adequate access to devices and the internet to work from home. Every click widens the attainment gap, which is why I am calling for every child on free school meals to have the catch-up kit and connectivity that they need to log in and learn from home. The Government may be distracted by the hangover of their party season, but their scant support for our students is no cause for celebration. The Government

must address this issue with the gravity it requires or step aside so that we can get on with the job, because our children, particularly our poorest children, do not get a second chance.

2.45 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): There is no doubt that lockdown has had a major impact on children’s wellbeing, but it has given us an appreciation of the amazing work that teachers do. Once again, I want to pay tribute to every headteacher, teacher and support staff member in Meon Valley. I have been really impressed by the way they have coped in very difficult times. I am also very grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), the Chair of the Education Committee, for securing this debate, as it brings forward many thoughts about how we can best help our children and young people in schools and colleges.

The pandemic has been hugely disruptive to education and there is no doubt that pupils’ mental health issues have increased, especially in secondary schools. I suggest that even before the pandemic mental health and children’s happiness was already becoming an issue. “The Good Childhood Report”, published in August 2020 by The Children’s Society, which looked at the happiness and mental health of 15-year-olds, had observed a notable increase in the proportion of children with low wellbeing—18% had low wellbeing, compared with figures of 11% to 13% in previous years. England ranked 36th out of 45 countries in Europe and North America for young people’s life satisfaction. We had the largest reduction in life satisfaction between 2015 and 2018 out of all participating countries. That is really not acceptable.

The “State of the nation 2020: children and young people’s wellbeing” report points out:

“Children’s wellbeing and their mental health can have a real impact on their development into their full potential both now and as a tool in their futures.”

The report shows a sustained dip in happiness with school and there is strong evidence that fear of failure in 15-year-olds is intrinsically linked to education. I reported about this in my “One Nation” paper on education, as there was evidence that our education and assessment system is no longer fit for purpose and is not preparing our young people adequately for a life of work. We have now heard from The Times Education Commission and the independent assessment report from the National Education Union, which provide more insight into what we can do to improve our curriculum. I think that will improve young people’s views on school and their mental health, and I will come back to that in a moment.

Hampshire’s local authority has created mental health support teams, which my local schools are finding very useful and should be a model the Government should look to continue to invest in, if not put further investment in, as child and adolescent mental health services are overwhelmed.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): I echo my hon. Friend’s thanks to teachers. Does she agree that having mental health first aid training across the community, as I am doing in Watford, where we are training 1,000 people in mental health first aid awareness, would help with this and would support teachers, parents, organisations and especially students as they move forward?

Mrs Drummond: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. I know that the Government have plans to ensure that teachers are also trained in mental health provision. One of my local schools has employed its own psychologist, as well as a mental health co-ordinator, and the number of students in this school receiving external mental health support has doubled in a year. Any further provision within the school would be filled immediately, so the need is increasing.

On a more positive note, “The Big Ask”, launched by the Children’s Commissioner, reached 500,000 children, and young people are now showing remarkable resilience and are determined to work hard and do well. “The Big Ask” report also states that the focus should be on helping every child to reach their goals, but that that needs

“careful curriculum design, early intervention and responsive teaching”.

Mental health is improved by providing subjects that young people are interested in, which is why I am so vocal about a 14 to 18 curriculum. Yesterday I attended the launch of the NEU’s commission on assessment, “A New Era”, and listened to young people talk about their views. It is clear that they are disappointed that the curriculum is limited, as is choice. They were concerned that many of them will fail—one third do because of the nature of the way exams are calculated—and they did not feel that the curriculum prepared them for life. Interestingly that is a theme from both of the commissions that have published so far—another three will be publishing shortly.

There is an overall feeling that young people have become stressed to the extent of asking, “What is the point of exams?” They are being taught to the test and how to pass them, rather than being educated. We need a curriculum that makes sense to young people so that they see a reason for studying, and I include vocational qualifications. We have lost creativity, and teachers have lost the love of teaching. One young person commented, “Teachers teach what they need to teach, not what they would like to teach to pass on their love of learning.”

This is also the case in early years and key stage 1, where children have lost much during the pandemic, particularly social interaction and the building blocks of learning, yet we now have tests in five of seven years in primary schools, at a time when the love of learning should be established, rather than teaching to tests. I am afraid that will continue to happen while we have this system.

More Than a Score says that 93% of teachers want a review of SATs, which are at the bottom of what parents look at when they choose a school. When looking for a school, parents care most about having teachers who care about their pupils and inspire them to learn. When asked how schools should be measured post pandemic, parents said it should be happiness and wellbeing of pupils, pupils making progress at an appropriate pace and a broad, rich curriculum. SATs came at the bottom again.

We need to assess pupils, but we must ensure that it is not at the cost of breadth or depth of education. The school-led tutoring grant has provided money for tutors, and schools are very grateful. However, the money does not fund the full cost of each tutor, and my schools say there is too much bureaucracy to secure it. Will the Minister make it simpler?

Catching up is one reason why I am also calling for an extended school day for everyone, not just to continue maths, English and the core subjects but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow said, to allow a wide range of extracurricular activities such as music, art, sport and clubs—all the subjects that cannot be fitted into the present school day and that contribute to pupils’ wellbeing. There are examples across the country where this is working well, and I urge the Government to look at them as pilot schemes.

I am pleased that the Government will continue to fund another couple of years of summer holiday schemes, which have been much welcomed by schools and children alike, especially where they give opportunities for children and young people to access a wide range of projects, both for learning and fun.

The world is changing fast. Young people need to be flexible and resilient but, most importantly, they need to be prepared for work and for anything that might be thrown at them. The working person is assessed on what they can do and what skills they offer. The existing education system appears to be designed around what pupils can remember for a short time. This has to change. Parents want it to change, employers want it to change, teachers want it to change and, more importantly, young people want it to change. This will not happen overnight, but let us listen to all these stakeholders and design a curriculum and an education system that help every child to achieve and to enjoy their school day at the same time.

2.52 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am pleased to participate in this debate, and I agree with so much of what has been said this afternoon.

Children and young people are ambitious and optimistic about their future. As we have heard, education staff have made an incredible effort to keep them learning and to support their wellbeing during the pandemic, but we should not underestimate the impact of the disruption they have suffered, especially those who face the greatest challenges and who experience the lowest attainment.

It is opportune that this debate is taking place against the backdrop of yesterday’s Government announcement of new education investment areas. This initiative has the potential to contribute to children and young people’s education recovery, provided it is properly led and designed; provided lessons are learned from previous initiatives, such as the London challenge and the opportunity areas; provided the right targets and success measures are put in place; provided it is adequately resourced; and provided the professional expertise of teachers and leaders is respected and supported. An overcentralised, over-prescriptive model will not deliver the hoped for benefits.

I echo the hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) by emphasising the importance of the early years when talking about children’s recovery. We all know that investment in the early years pays the greatest dividends in children’s outcomes, and very young children have seen the greatest proportion of their lives affected by the pandemic. As we have heard, this has adversely affected their social skills, their vocabulary, their development and, indeed, their school readiness.

[Kate Green]

I welcome the investment that the Government have announced, such as for training early years staff or the Nuffield early language intervention, but more is needed both in resources—the Minister will be aware of Labour's proposal for an increase in the early years premium to match the primary pupil premium—and in a proper, comprehensive and ambitious strategy for early education.

Funding for schools will not return in real terms to 2010 levels until 2024, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that by 2024-25, resources for colleges will still be about 10% lower in real terms than they were in 2010, and that those for sixth-form colleges will be 24% lower. It is not clear whether the new funding for education investment areas will redress that injustice. I note that additional funds are to be available only to "some priority areas", and the programme otherwise seems to amount to little more than forced academisation for more schools.

I echo the enthusiasm that we have heard this afternoon for an extension to the school day. Indeed, the Secretary of State himself has suggested that he would like all schools to consider providing a school day of six and a half hours. Research suggests that an extended school day, delivered by staff with high levels of training and linked to existing classes and teaching, could be important in helping children to make up lost learning. It could allow for time to be allocated, too, for the one-to-one and small group tutoring that we know to be effective.

As we have heard repeatedly this afternoon, however, the Government's national tutoring programme is failing to deliver that. Ministers were warned that awarding a cut-price contract to Dutch facilities company Randstad would deliver neither the quality nor the volume needed, and that is exactly what has happened. Some 600,000 places per term are needed for children's education recovery, yet the national tutoring programme is currently reaching only 10% of target pupil numbers. The Government need to do some serious thinking about the quality of tutoring provided and the delivery and reach of the programme, so that all children and young people who can benefit from it have the chance to do so. If Randstad cannot deliver the contract adequately, that contract should be removed from it, and those who can handle it better, including our excellent school leaders, should have the chance to do so.

I agree that making more time for children to engage in extracurricular activities is really important as part of the extension of the school day and to support social and emotional wellbeing. Indeed, it might also increase participation by appealing to those pupils who would otherwise miss out but who could benefit most from extended provision, and ensure that these vital wider activities are not squeezed out even further than is already the case in a crowded curriculum. The Education Policy Institute has said that any extra school time should be useful for activity and enrichment activities, and that has also been recommended by the Education Endowment Foundation toolkit. However, teachers in England already work very long hours, including on lesson preparation and complying with monitoring and reporting requirements. In looking at an extension of the school day, it is really important that we hear how the Government plan to staff and resource it and to draw on the research evidence of what is effective.

Finally, as we have heard, there is widespread agreement on the importance of good mental health for successful learning and wider social participation. That applies right across the education sector, from early years to higher education, for students and for the workforce. Parentkind has shown that exam stress remains a top anxiety for students and that serious mental health issues are experienced disproportionately by children and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds, those with special educational needs and disabilities, and those receiving free school meals. It is not surprising that parents give strong support for Labour's plan for expert mental health support in schools. I hope that Ministers will look really carefully at that. May I also urge the Minister to engage with the #BeeWell programme in Greater Manchester, which aims to work with young people and a range of partners to improve mental health and wellbeing?

We should also note that university mental health and wellbeing services are supporting a higher volume of students, often with more complex needs, as a result of the pandemic. Increased pressure on NHS services means that university support services have stepped in, but the lack of further detail about a new approach to mental health services for 18 to 25-year-olds, as set out in the NHS long-term plan, is an issue of concern. Increasing capacity in statutory services, with seamless transitions across university and NHS services, will be key to both preventing and treating mental ill health among young adults and to supporting their learning and wellbeing. I hope that the Minister will co-operate closely with his counterparts at the Department of Health and Social Care in order to secure that.

Our children and young people should and must be at the forefront of our thinking as we recover from the pandemic. I hope this debate will encourage a bold and ambitious approach from the Government; the Minister will have heard this afternoon the strong support for him in that endeavour from all parts of the House.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I must protect the rest of the time, so we will now have a formal time limit of five minutes.

2.59 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), whom I hold in high regard as a parliamentarian. I thoroughly enjoyed our exchanges when I sat here chuntering away and she was on the Opposition Front Bench.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for securing the debate. He is a long-term, passionate advocate, I enjoyed working under him as he chaired the Education Committee and I continue to hear from him.

Let us be frank: the Government have done an awful lot. Not only have they thrown £5 billion at education recovery—including £1.5 billion for tutoring; £950 million direct to schools this academic year and the previous one for evidence-based interventions; £1 billion to extend the recovery premium to the end of 2024; and £400 million for training and professional development—but there was the excellent holiday activity fund, which began in the great constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove

and Talke under the leadership of Carol Shanahan, the co-owner of Port Vale football club and the co-chair of the Hubb Foundation with Adam Yates, a former professional footballer. During the pandemic they not only delivered 300,000 meals to families across the city of Stoke-on-Trent but led the way in offering more than 100 different opportunities for the holiday activity programme, not by building shiny new buildings but by using existing schools and their staff and relationships with the people they knew, young and old, bringing them into the building and providing one hot meal every single day. It was a fantastic scheme and Carol and her team deserve all the plaudits they get.

I was delighted to see that the “Levelling Up” White Paper builds on the idea of levelling up and catching up in education. The city of Stoke-on-Trent is now an education investment area, bringing us a new high-quality 16-to-19 free school. I will of course campaign for that to end up in the constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke. I will not stop there, though: if we are to help catch-up, we need to unlock free schools for 11 to 16-year-olds. I have been working and having conversations with Star Academies and Michaela Community School, which is led by the fantastic Katharine Birbalsingh, who I hope will bring a free school bid for the constituency in wave 15. It is about having high standards, high expectations and a knowledge-rich curriculum and shaking the apple tree in the great city of Stoke-on-Trent so that we no longer accept mediocrity when it comes to educational outcomes and destinations for our young people but send a clear message that we can do this, we expect and we want more for the young people we are proud to serve with.

Let me just correct the record: my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher), who is no longer in his place, said that I might feel some illness about the idea of forest schools, but I can confirm that my daughter's nursery in Weston has a forest school and I am proud that she can access that. I have seen the benefits of forest schools at first hand at Burnwood Community School in Chell.

I wanted to leave some time for some key things. I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill on the Ofsted inspection of multi-academy trusts, which had the backing of not only Government Members but Members from both the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats. I was very grateful for their support. Even though the Government have sadly rejected that Bill, they have left open the window to more discussions. I will embarrass the Government by reminding them that the Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston), was a sponsor of that Bill, so he knows all about it and will, I am sure, lobby internally to make sure those changes are made.

We need to see more brokerage deals with the good multi-academy trusts to make sure that they can enter the city of Stoke-on-Trent and other areas, because if we are to help with catching up, we need to bring the very best into our city. Currently, too many single-academy trusts are not doing their bit.

As the House will have heard from me from a sedentary position, I absolutely adore the idea of extending the school day until 5 pm or 6 pm—for as long as necessary. Schools are buildings that young people know and where they feel safe. The extended school day would provide the opportunity to build and harbour relationships

with parents, who could come into the building and perhaps benefit from educational classes or opportunities through the family hub model that the Government are pushing and for which the city of Stoke-on-Trent is bidding. Hopefully, we will get one hub per constituency—hint, hint, Minister. We want to see that idea going forward. Although some people argue that the extended school day should just be for the curriculum, I believe it should also be used for enrichment. The youth guarantee offer in the “Levelling Up” White Paper indicates that that is the direction of travel.

Finally, we have selective education by religion, by postcode and by house price; it is about time we unlocked selective education by bringing back grammar schools so that parents have opportunity and competition in their local area. I will shortly be leading a campaign to unlock that potential for our great country.

3.4 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I will try to be brief, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for bringing this debate before the House today, because it is such an important issue. When I think about everything that is happening across Richmond Park as we emerge from the pandemic, this is the No. 1 issue in my constituency, particularly the mental health aspect. I have had lots of conversations with schools throughout the pandemic and as we have emerged from lockdown, and this is the most important thing, more than anything else.

The education catch-up funding has been very welcome and has been well used across my constituency, but it is the mental health impact of the lockdown that is having the biggest impact on our youngest citizens. When I speak to headteachers, I hear all sorts of stories. They tell me about the new reception class that started in September 2021: with these four and five-year-olds, so much of their lives has been spent in lockdown that they are suffering extreme separation anxiety from their parents. It is not unusual in any reception year to find that one or two children get anxious and teary about separating from their parents, but they have whole classes who are crying for hours, which is completely unprecedented. I fear for our very youngest as they are entering their school years.

Going up through primary school age, we are finding that, in the older years, the children who spent two years at home sat in front of laptops are finding it really difficult to play with each other. Small boys do not know how to play football in the playground any more. I do not know about anyone else, but it is those little details that I find really distressing, particularly as the mother of an eight-year-old son: the thought that our young people do not know how to play with each other. They do not know how to share in the classroom, or how to talk to each other. As we get through into secondary school, the impact of the past two years is really beginning to show in young people who have spent too much time on the internet over those years. They have become isolated and do not know how to reach out, and are really struggling with their self-image and their mental health. They have spent too much time looking at sites that are frankly unhelpful for their education. Misinformation has been a massive source of problems during this pandemic for all sorts of people, but for our young people most of all.

[Sarah Olney]

I want to pay my own tribute to all the teaching staff and everybody involved in education across Richmond and Kingston. They have been absolutely heroic and have really stepped up for our young people, and I am absolutely in awe of what they have achieved, but what is really coming through from them now is that, more and more, they are having to deal with mental health issues in the classroom. They are not trained to deal with those issues, and they have enough to do to catch up on the academic side, particularly for pupils who are approaching exams: there have been so many absences in this academic year, which is a real problem for those staff.

We need to broaden the mental health resources that are available in the community. We need more school nurses, and those nurses need to have training in mental health. We need to open up more access to child and adolescent mental health services, because the waiting lists are a real problem. We need adolescent mental health services at our GPs. We need to give parents more options so that, when they are at their wits' end with how to help their children, they know where to go, so that they are going not to schools for help—schools that are ill-equipped to give it—but to a range of different sources across the community. I know that time is short, so if this is the only point I can make, please can we have more resources to help our young people with their mental health in schools and outside them? That, more than anything else, is what Richmond Park needs.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The time limit is now three minutes. I call Jim Shannon.

3.8 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As the grandfather of two covid babies who have not had the joy of the local mums' and toddlers' groups and who have not been able to build up essential social skills, to which the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) referred, I have real concern about the long-term nature of the lockdown social skills gap. I have seen mothers in churches unable to enjoy the service, as their little one is frightened in creche as they have not mingled with new people their entire lives. We have young children with an enforced early understanding of mortality and with what, for some, has turned into an obsession with hand cleaning. There are long-term issues that we must put in the work to combat.

Some 12.6% of children and young people in Northern Ireland experience common mood disorders such as anxiety and depression. That is around 25% higher than in other nations. My colleague Michelle McIlveen, an MLA, the Education Minister for Northern Ireland and a former teacher, has put some measures in place. I want to comment on those measures, because I know that the Minister here is always very interested to know what we are doing back home. The Minister in Northern Ireland has put in place the children and young people's emotional health and wellbeing framework. She has allocated an additional £16 million in funding to that end. She has also set up a text-a-nurse service, a REACH—resilience education assisting change to happen—youth programme, an on-site nursing pilot in five post-primary schools and independent counselling services for schools. I know that the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) is always keen to hear what we are doing in Northern Ireland so I wanted to add that.

A new training programme also provides an opportunity for the entire education sector workforce of 60,000 staff to improve their understanding of trauma, which is really important. The Minister of Education has also put a further £5 million into education wellbeing funding. The healthy happy minds pilot to support therapeutic and counselling services in primary schools has begun and, along with the Engage programme, supports children and young people's learning in the new academic year.

In response to the Belfast live great big parenting survey, 32% of parents said that their children were struggling to cope with their emotions; 23% said that they had always struggled but lockdown was making it worse; and 15% said that they were having problems with mental health for the first time. The pressure on families is huge and we must alleviate it in a co-ordinated way to ensure that no child is left behind and that every child who is struggling knows that help is available in school and out of school.

Needless to say, we can make a difference, but we must continue to allocate the funding and actively work on restoring that which covid has robbed our children of. Thank you very much Madam Deputy Speaker.

3.11 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): I would like to thank the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for bringing forward this important debate. It could not be more timely, a year on from Sir Kevan Collins' appointment as the Government's education recovery commissioner. I want to start by recognising the huge contributions that our nation's school and college staff, and parents, have made to preserving and protecting our children's education every day since the beginning of the pandemic. They continue to do so day in, day out. I also want to echo the contributions of colleagues from across the House who have set out the education recovery challenge we face with clarity and compassion.

We have heard from a number of right hon. and hon. Members in what has been a broad debate covering high needs challenges, the crisis in mental health, the level of exclusions and the need for urgency in tackling the issues at scale. My right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) spoke about the importance of communication with parents, and raised concerns about ventilation and supplies of tests to schools. My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who is a tireless champion for schools and colleges in her constituency, spoke about the last-minute chaotic announcements and the impact on schools and children. She also spoke powerfully about children not getting a second chance and why we have to get recovery right. My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) spoke about the importance of adequate resources to meet the challenges faced, investment in early years and Labour's recovery plan. I pay tribute to her for her tireless hard work on this ambitious plan.

While recovery is vital and the focus of today's debate, school staff, parents and pupils are still living with the day-to-day reality of covid across the country. Pupil absences are up 35% since the start of January, and a quarter of schools have 15% of their teachers and leaders off work. But on both vaccination and

ventilation, Ministers continue to fall short on basic measures that would keep children learning together and playing together. The Education Secretary has yet to tell us exactly how many volunteer teachers have come forward and what his workforce plan looks like. Any member of school staff will tell you that we are not out of the woods yet when it comes to covid. Yet we must act immediately to tackle the generational education recovery challenge we face.

As it stands, Ministers' complacent and inadequate plans risk widening existing inadequacies and inequalities, compounding the damage caused by a decade of Conservative cuts and stunting the life chances of a generation of children. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found that an average loss of six months schooling could see a reduction in their lifetime income of 4%. This equates to a total of £350 billion in lost earnings for the 8.7 million school-age children in the UK.

This is the stark scale of the generational challenge we now face, and the Government's ambition must match it, yet the total package of so-called catch-up funding equates to just £300 per pupil. That is just £1 per day that children have been out of school. Let us compare that with the £1,685 per pupil recommended by the education recovery commissioner, the £1,800 per pupil in the US and the £2,100 per pupil in the Netherlands. It is no wonder that Sir Kevan resigned in protest. This meagre package will also compound the damage done by a decade of cuts in school spending. Even with the money announced in the spending review, the IFS says that per-pupil funding remains lower than a decade ago, and the broken national funding formula will see the least deprived schools receiving more money than the most deprived, to the tune of almost 5% by 2023. Despite rehashed announcements this week on levelling up that were big on rhetoric but low on practical delivery, the bottom line is that this Government will continue to hollow out areas of historical deprivation when it comes to education funding and recovery.

Meanwhile, the Government's flagship national tutoring programme is failing children and failing taxpayers. Recent figures show that the scheme has reached less than 10% of those due to receive support in this academic year. The Government's contractor is unable to say whether it is hitting targets to engage children receiving the pupil premium who are most in need of support. There have also been huge problems with the tuition partners' online platform, frustrating engagement for many schools. Three quarters of tutoring providers surveyed recently said they felt that it did not have sufficient resources to deliver the scheme. Will the Minister therefore commit today to publishing information on the reach of the programme by region and among those who had the most time out of school? Will he also say what he will do to work with schools to address the problems that are preventing engagement?

I want to turn now to mental health, which has long been a silent pandemic. Even before covid, the NHS suggested that as many as one in six five to 10-year-olds suffered from mental ill health. The Royal College of Psychiatrists claims that 2020 saw the highest ever number of young people referred for mental health help. The poorest 20% of households are now four times more likely than the wealthiest 20% to have a serious mental health problem by age 11. CAMHS have been systematically cut in the last decade and interventions have been forced

to move away from preventive work to crisis response. Once again, however, Ministers have ducked another generational change. The recent funding for mental health support teams will cover just 35% of schools by 2023. This is not nearly ambitious enough to meet the heightened demand or to counteract a decade of underinvestment in children's mental health. Barnardo's and others have been clear that there should be a dedicated mental health support team in every school, and Labour agrees.

After 21 months and four waves, this Government are still fundamentally unable to combat the impact that this pandemic is having on our children. The Government response has meant that disruption and uncertainty have become an exhausting normality for teachers, school staff, pupils and parents. That cannot continue. As we learn to live with covid, education recovery presents a historic challenge and we must rise to it. Labour wants to harness the opportunity that this watershed moment provides to tackle long-standing inequalities. Our children's recovery plan would support our country's children to play, learn and thrive together once again. Our clear, costed proposals are an ambitious plan that would deliver school activities and breakfast clubs, quality mental health support to every child and every school, and small group tutoring for all those who need it, as well as making a real investment in our teachers.

Schools continue to battle covid in classrooms as we speak. Meanwhile, the consequences of learning loss loom larger with every passing day. Time and again, the Government have demonstrated that they are fundamentally unable to plan for or mitigate the impact of covid on our children's education. The summit of Ministers' ambition for education recovery falls well below what our children need and deserve.

The Government are paralysed by the Prime Minister's repeated scandals, and while they dither, inequalities widen. Without further intervention, the damage of the pandemic will become irreversible and the impact will plague children, the education system and the wider economy for decades to come. Every day this Government waste is another our children will not get back. If Ministers will not step up for our nation's children, the next Labour Government certainly will.

3.20 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on securing this debate on a hugely important subject. We have heard fantastic speeches from across the House. I recognise that I will not necessarily have the time to respond to every point that has been raised, but I wholeheartedly agree with the right hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) that this is a vital topic in all our constituencies.

It is right that this debate cover both education and wellbeing recovery, as we know they are parts of the same thing. Recovery is a key priority for me, as it is for the Government, and a key part of building back better, levelling up and ensuring that we are ready and skilled for a future in which the next generation can prosper.

Many hon. Members have spoken about the ambition that we should do all it takes to ensure our children recover from the impact of the pandemic. I say clearly that I recognise that the education sector continues to

[Mr Robin Walker]

face challenges caused by covid. Like so many colleagues in this debate, I thank everyone who works in early years provision, schools and colleges for their ongoing dedication to keeping education and childcare settings operating and supporting children and young people in this vital period.

The best place for young children to be, for their education, mental health and wellbeing, is in the classroom. That is why protecting face-to-face education continues to be our absolute priority. I know that children and young people in particular have had to adapt to the challenges presented by the covid-19 pandemic. My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow, in his introductory speech, mentioned the importance of mental health resilience. Many children have shown and are showing remarkable resilience in difficult circumstances, but some have found this period especially difficult for their mental health and wellbeing, so tackling that is one of our key priorities.

Education plays a huge role in the lives of children and young people, and it is also a crucial contributor to wellbeing, as we heard from the children's commissioner. That is one reason why protecting face-to-face education is so important: it can help to combat the understandable underlying anxieties that children have about their life, future and friendships. It is also why we have made clear that the recovery support that schools, colleges and other educational settings provide for their pupils should include time devoted to supporting wellbeing.

We are supporting schools to prioritise attendance and providing extra teaching where needed, to ensure that pupils stay on track with their wider learning and development. However, we must also ensure that schools understand the pandemic's impact on children's ability to engage in learning, so that they can adapt their curriculum and pastoral support to help pupils to stay engaged.

I have heard from a number of hon. Friends in this debate, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher), about the importance of behaviour. To keep pupils engaged in education, it is crucial that we ensure that schools can offer calm, orderly, safe and supportive environments where both pupils and staff can thrive. Disorderly classrooms not only have an impact on children's ability to learn, but can equally affect their mental health and cause some children to stay away from school, missing vital learning time.

We also know that dealing with misbehaviour can be stressful for teachers, and too many teachers have left the profession because of such problems. I want to ensure that teachers and schools have the best strategies and techniques at their disposal. That is why I am today launching a consultation on how schools can create a culture of good behaviour, to inform revised behaviour guidance, which will provide practical advice for all school staff on creating positive environments through consistent routines and high expectations.

I have seen on many visits to schools the difference that a strong behaviour culture can make, particularly for some of the most disadvantaged children and those with SEN. Schools and colleges must also be able to respond where children are facing specific issues and may need more expert support. We remain committed to promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing

in our schools and colleges. Our recent £15 million wellbeing for education recovery and return programmes have provided free expert training, support and resources for staff dealing with children and young people experiencing additional pressures from covid-19. Around 12,000 schools and colleges across the country benefited from that support, delivered through local authorities.

We are also taking action to help schools to build their capacity to promote the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, and their ability to ensure that those who need help with their mental health receive appropriate support. The Government are providing £9.5 million to offer senior mental health lead training to around a third of all state schools and colleges in England in '21-22. This is part of the commitment we made in our 2017 Green Paper "Transforming children and young people's mental health provision" to offer that training to all state schools and colleges by 2025. We know many senior mental health leads have already started their training, which will enable them to start to apply their learning this academic year. That will help them build on the incredible work they and their colleagues have done throughout the pandemic to promote and support the wellbeing of pupils.

Throughout the pandemic the Government have put in place a wide range of specialist mental health support for people of all ages who need it. For children and young people we have ensured NHS mental health services remained open throughout the pandemic, offering digital and remote access as well as face-to-face support where appropriate to maintain care and accept new referrals.

In the longer term, we are expanding and transforming mental health services through the NHS long-term plan with additional investment of £2.3 billion per year by '23-24. This will allow at least 345,000 more children and young people to access NHS funded mental health support. I very much take the points of the right hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) on earlier interventions and will continue to discuss that with health colleagues.

In addition, as part of the Government commitment to build back better, in March 2021 the Department of Health and Social Care published our mental health recovery action plan, backed by an additional £500 million of targeted investment to ensure we have the right support in place for this financial year, including £79 million used to significantly expand children's mental health services in the financial year. My hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) and others highlighted the important role of the mental health support teams in schools and colleges, which is stepping up over this period.

We all know that covid-19 has caused considerable disruption to the education of our nation's children and young people. Evidence shows that while this has been significant for all children, it has been especially so for the disadvantaged and those with the least amount of time left in education. That is why nearly £5 billion has been committed to fund a comprehensive recovery package, following the evidence and providing support to all pupils while prioritising the most disadvantaged and vulnerable and those with least time left.

Our approach provides a mix of immediate and longer-term support, funding those interventions the evidence tells us will be the most effective. Universal programmes such as the £650 million catch-up premium

in '20-21 and teacher training opportunities will support all pupils no matter where they live. They sit alongside targeted interventions, focusing on those most in need through our targeted tutoring programme, summer schools and the recovery premium, extended in the spending review by £1 billion for the next two academic years. It is right that we prioritise those with the least time left in education: from September 2022 funded learning over the next three academic years will also increase by 40 hours a year, giving every 16-to-19 student the equivalent of an extra hour a week.

Extensive evidence shows that tutoring can be one of the most effective tools to support learning and accelerate pupil progress. That is why we are investing £1.5 billion in tutoring to provide up to 100 million tutoring hours for children and young people across England by 2024. Building on the success of the programme's first year, more than 300,000 tuition courses began last term: a good start to delivering our ambitious target of 2 million courses this academic year.

An estimated 230,000 tuition courses have been started through the school-led pillar, demonstrating that providing greater flexibility to schools to deliver tutoring is helping us reach as many young people as possible. I have seen fantastic examples of that up and down the country, where academic mentors and school-led tutors are delivering real benefits. I welcome the feedback from the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) on the impact in her patch.

We have set high standards for the programme and feedback from schools shows the positive impact it is having in helping pupils catch up. In the first national tutoring programme satisfaction survey of this academic year, 77% of responding schools said the programme was having a positive impact on pupils' attainment and 80% said it was having a positive impact on pupils' confidence.

Although we are making good progress, I recognise that the programme needs to pick up more steam. We are closely monitoring the performance of the programme and its delivery organisation, Randstad, with daily and weekly operational reviews and regular meetings at senior level. A number of improvements have been made since September; for example, tuition partners identified a number of areas to improve the way they work with schools through the tuition hub digital platform, but I recognise there is further to go.

I cannot say everything I would like to say in this debate, but what I can say is that delivering on educational recovery is absolutely crucial and we will continue to work, taking the feedback from across the House in this excellent debate today.

3.29 pm

Robert Halfon: I thank all the Members who spoke in the debate, particularly the right hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown), who is leading on children's mental health. His work is really important. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher) also talked about mental health and the longer school day.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) addressed the digital divide, which we have still got to work on. My hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) rightly said that we should better prepare and equip people for the world of work. We agree on a lot and she also supports a longer school day.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), who was passionate in her previous role as shadow Education Secretary, talked about early years and also supported a longer school day, which is very welcome.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) talked about the extended school day. He supports grammar schools. I am in favour of them, but it is wrong that only 3% of pupils on free school meals attend grammar schools. That has got to change.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) also talked about mental health, showing the breadth of concern across the House. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke movingly about school closures.

Clearly, there is a consensus across the House for the Government to do more on mental health and more on the catch-up programme and to support a longer school day. Finally, I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that Randstad has got to sort it out or he has got to boot them out. It is not acceptable that all that taxpayers' money is being spent on that huge company, which is not providing the catch-up and the tuition that our children vitally need.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the effectiveness of the Government's education catch-up and mental health recovery programmes.

Committee on Standards: Members' Code of Conduct Review

[Relevant Documents: Fourth Report of the Committee on Standards, Review of the Code of Conduct: proposals for consultation, HC 270.]

3.31 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Committee on Standards' Review of the Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament.

I am grateful to the members of the Committee on Standards, three of whom I see, so we have got a quorum, the Clerks, who work assiduously on the Committee, the commissioner, the registrar and all those who work in this field on behalf of the House.

Let's face it: we are in a bit of a mess. Voters are quite angry with us at the moment and they think parliamentary standards are a contradiction in terms. I am afraid that the Owen Paterson debacle, the rows about funding the renovations in Downing Street and the illicit lockdown parties are damaging trust in all MPs and in Parliament. That matters because it undermines confidence in democracy. It corrodes the silver thread of our constitution. In the Prime Minister's words, we need to look at ourselves in the mirror.

Of course, I start from a basic assumption that every Member is an honourable Member. We are all here because we want to change the world. We have different views about how to change it, but we all want to change the world for the better. Sometimes we make mistakes. I have made more than most. In my experience, fortunately, the House is very understanding when a Member apologises or corrects the record.

However, we have to think carefully about the issue of lying in Parliament. It is not simple. "Lies, damned lies and statistics" goes the old phrase. Two people can see the same event in completely different ways. One might think that the other is lying, or call the other a liar. I hate to get religious, but even the Bible has four gospels, three of them supposedly recounting exactly the same events, but with contradictory details: Jesus gave his sermons sitting or standing; he was on a mount or on a plain; "Blessed are the poor" or, "Blessed are the poor in spirit".

So I am very reluctant to have the commissioner weigh in on whether an MP has lied or misled the House. Parliament must be a place of free speech. Incidentally, the commissioner completely agrees with me on this point. She has told the Committee several times that she has no desire to be the arbiter of truth in the House of Commons.

As the Leader of the House said this morning, some things are a matter of opinion or a question of emphasis—or "em-phasiS" as my mother used to say. But if a Member lies and refuses to correct the record and the public can plainly see that the Member has lied, what do we do? Do we force the Member who calls it out to add the word "inadvertent" when we know perfectly well that the Member who uses that word does not mean it at all, so we are forcing them to lie? Do we throw the Member out of the Chamber if they refuse to withdraw? That is what the rules say we should do. Where is the justice in that? Should we refer the matter to the Committee of Privileges? That is the old system. We would do that because the matter would be considered a contempt of the House. That requires the governing

party to assent, because there could be a vote on the matter, and members of the Committee on Privileges to act without partisan interests. It effectively means that, at the moment, the only arbiter of whether a Minister or ordinary Member of the House has lied is actually the Prime Minister who decides how to whip.

Today, that puts a phenomenal onus on Conservative Members, but in the past and in the future it will be on Members of other political parties. I heard what the Leader of the House said earlier, but I fear the rules were written at a time when a Member could not imagine anything worse than having their honour traduced in public. Frankly, honour is not what it used to be.

I do not think that the rule, as it stands, will hold forever. I do not have an answer to the question, but, incidentally, I do not buy the argument that it is not a lie if the Member believed it at the time they said it. Just because someone has persuaded themselves or lied to themselves, does not mean that they have not lied to the House.

On transparency, the biggest issue for many voters is whether we are acting in the public interest or in our own interest. We have seen cases of conflict of interest. We pray each day that Members may,

"never lead the nation wrongly through love of power, desire to please, or unworthy ideals but laying aside all private interests and prejudices keep in mind their responsibility to seek to improve the condition of all mankind."

I am sure that every single one of us thinks we follow that every single day—we all find ourselves innocent in the court of our own opinion—but we sometimes need the harsh light of transparency to reach deeper into our own self-interest.

I am sometimes surprised, and I think Committee members would agree, by some colleagues who simply cannot see the conflict of interest that they are engaged in, which is absolutely plain to everybody else. The key lies in transparency. People should be up front and honest and let the public assess whether they have resolved the conflict properly.

Unfortunately, the system is far too opaque. It is almost impossible to find all of an individual MP's financial interests online and sometimes it is difficult to understand what they mean without exploring further. The website is a complete mess and we need an overhaul of all the transparency arrangements. Moreover, Ministers, who, of course, by definition are Members of this House or the other, are not required to register hospitality received in a ministerial capacity with the House, so they are held to a lesser degree of transparency than the rest of us. That cannot be right.

In one instance last year, more than a dozen Members received the same hospitality—they were at the same event, drank the same wine or beer, ate the same food and watched the same show—but only the Back-Bench Members were required to register the full details with the House within 28 days. In some cases, the Ministers' declarations have still not been made public by their relevant Departments nearly a year after the event and I am guessing that they will be going to the same event again in a couple of weeks' time. That is completely within the rules but, to use the word of Lord Evans, the Chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, it is "bonkers". It is time we changed that rule. All people should be treated equally under the law and all Members should be treated equally under the rules of the House.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am listening with great interest to the debate. The Chair of the Committee is talking about transparency in relation to financial interests. Would he comment on transparency in relation to non-financial interests, which may sometimes set up a conflict of interest for Members?

Chris Bryant: There has been confusion about that in the past, because we have not tended to encourage Members to register all their unremunerated interests whereas, oddly enough, Ministers do have to register them in the ministerial register of interests. I think it would be better if we just registered everything. There was a tendency for Members to say, "By the way, I'm the chair of the village hall committee," which I am perfectly relaxed about. Why not put it all out there? I think it would be easier for everybody, because there would be no debate and it would make it simpler.

On the issue of second jobs, as the Committee has heard in evidence, many people see it all in a black and white way. They say, "MPs get paid more than double the average wage," "You're in the top 5% of earners," "Why isn't one job enough for you?", and, "When you take on second jobs, what on earth do you think the corporations are buying other than your influence and the letters 'MP'?"

However, even people who say that we should ban all second jobs row back a little when you put some specifics to them. A&E nurse? "Fine." GP? "OK." Helping out on a family farm? "Yes, of course." Running a family firm just to keep it in business? "All right." A bit of broadcasting or writing? "Well, maybe, if you must." Chairing a charitable board or a university? "Yeah, yeah"—and so it goes on.

Some have suggested that we should have a list of acceptable posts that MPs can take on, or that we should empower the Committee or the commissioner to approve any outside interests. All of us on the Committee think that posts involving parliamentary advice should definitely be banned, because that is a clear conflict of interests, but I am concerned that introducing some of the suggestions would lead to the Committee making entirely subjective decisions which should really be made by voters, not by anybody else.

This leaves us with a difficulty. We all know when someone is swinging the lead and devoting far more time and energy to their other work than to Parliament. We see it—we know better than anyone else when being an MP has become the second job rather than the first—but perhaps we, as parliamentarians, should be talking more to our colleagues about that, and the political parties should be doing more in that field.

Some, including the Committee on Standards in Public Life, have said that we should come up with a "reasonable" amount of time that an MP could spend in a year, or a week or a month, on an outside interest, or a "reasonable" amount of money that they should be allowed to earn. The Committee—I think—is not yet convinced of that.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con) *indicated assent*.

Chris Bryant: I see some nodding. For a start, I do not know how it could be policed. Some have suggested that MPs should fill in timesheets, but I cannot see that happening. Moreover, it seems invidious to tackle an MP's earned income but not their unearned income, for instance from shareholdings or trusts.

Every constituency is different; every MP is different; and while the political parties should pay a greater role in turfing out those who are swinging the lead, in the end I think that that is what the ballot box is there for.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I am grateful for the fine introduction that the hon. Gentleman is giving to the debate, and I thank him for his work on the Committee on Standards. One of the issues that we have discussed in the Committee is that of a Member perhaps writing a book—I know that the hon. Gentleman has some experience of writing books—and the income generated by it. Writing a book is something that Members would do in their spare time, and could be called a second job if they were earning from it. It is not clear how that sort of thing could be dealt with.

I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman about timesheets and the like. Does he agree that while some of the suggestions are about certain types of job, such as working in the NHS, there is an understanding that people working in business can also bring valuable experience to the House?

Chris Bryant: I am very upset with the hon. Gentleman, because he said that I had written some books but he did not say "some very good books, which are available in all good bookshops." However, I declare my interest, Madam Deputy Speaker, before I am reported to myself.

There is a serious point here. I think that voters are well equipped to make decisions about this. It does not quite work equally between marginal constituencies and what are considered to be safe constituencies, but, speaking for myself, I think it would be odd if we were to say that MPs should not be allowed to write. The written word is as important as the spoken word when it comes to pursuing the things that we all believe in. If the House feels differently, however, I will stop writing books. [HON. MEMBERS: "No, no!"] We are not having a Division on that, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): There is a difference, surely, between declaring when one is doing something or has an outside interest, and the activity or interest being banned. There needs to be a clear distinction between those two.

Chris Bryant: This is what I return to. For me, the key issue is the conflict of interests. If you are pursuing a financial interest when you speak in the Chamber, or when you are talking to Ministers, or when you are in the corridors of power lobbying people, that is wrong. It is immoral, it demeans our political democracy, and it is rightly banned. The question is whether the public can come to a clear understanding of how you are operating as an MP, and whether you have resolved any conflict of interests in the interests of the public.

I want to say something about rules and principles. I know that some colleagues have reacted adversely to our suggestion of the inclusion of a new principle of respect—incidentally, I suspect that we may change "respect" to "respectfulness"—but let me be clear: we are adamant that while the Nolan principles of honesty, leadership, selflessness and so on are important and aspirational, the commissioner can only investigate a breach of the rules, not a breach of a principle. For instance, it would be impossible for her to investigate an alleged failure to be selfless enough. It would be equally invidious and

[Chris Bryant]

bonkers for her to investigate a failure to show enough respect, which is why we are not proposing that she should be able to do so. We will make this abundantly clear in the next report that we produce.

We are not proposing that the commissioner would be able to investigate words said in the Chamber. That is solely a matter for Mr Speaker, or the Chair, and for nobody else. Yes, there are rules about our conduct. Bullying is wrong, and in a workplace such as this, which is hierarchical—I would say overly hierarchical—we forget too easily the power we have. However, what we say in the Chamber is a matter for the Chair, and for nobody else.

My final point is about appeals. We do have a form of appeal at the moment. If the commissioner finds that a Member has committed a serious breach of the rules, the Member can appeal that decision to the Standards Committee. However, it is my firm conviction—I am not sure that the Committee is quite there yet, but it is my personal conviction—that we should go further and create a formal appeal process, with established grounds for appeal on both the finding and the sanction. Sir Ernest Ryder, who formerly ran the tribunals service in England and Wales, is working on that for us at the moment, and I hope he will be able to lay out a firm set of proposals in this area by Easter.

I think that the former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), who is in her place, is quite right to say that we need more alignment between Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme cases and non-ICGS cases, but I would be reluctant to hive off all cases to the independent expert panel. The Standards Committee's combination of lay members and Members works. She set it up, it works and I would not abandon it. When we get it right, as I think we did on Owen Paterson, we enhance the reputation of the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We have quite a short time for this debate, so I urge Members to take no more than six minutes each.

3.47 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I will be as brief as I possibly can. First, I would like to thank the Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), for the manner in which he chairs the Committee, for the way he presented the report, and for his diligence and the work he puts in to this Committee. It is a very arduous Committee, and it has a very heavy workload.

Chris Bryant: It was not meant to be.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: It is meant to be light duties, and I thought I could combine it with other things, but I have given up other things to stay on this Committee, because I think the work we are now doing on the revision of the code is so important.

I could touch on some of the points the hon. Gentleman made. I think he is right about the key being the transparency of conflicts of interests. We should not be denigrating people in this House who have outside interests. Some of them are unavoidable and some of

them are by choice, but I firmly believe that this House is enriched by having people who stay on in Parliament, particularly later in their career, while involved with other interests. Being a senior barrister, for example, may take a Member away for weeks on end on very important cases, but having such people in this House means that we have such resources at our disposal much more readily than if these people felt they were squeezed out and were not welcome here. So I agree with him about the time point, and I agree with him about respectfulness.

I actually joined this Committee because I wanted to be involved in the revision of the code. This is ongoing work, and it has been going on for a very long time—since the previous commissioner first started work on the revision of the code. It is meant to happen every three years, but it has been delayed and delayed. So the report we are discussing actually incorporates the results of a great number of hours of work and thought.

The sad thing is that, if we just look at the Chamber today, we see there are a couple of handfuls of hon. Members here who are engaged with this debate. It has always been the biggest problem, in my view, that people only start engaging with the code when they are accused of something, they are worried about being accused of something or they are trying to steer clear of falling foul of the rules. There is not nearly enough discussion, reflection and understanding of why the code exists, of the principles and values behind the code, or indeed of how we should learn to talk about how we aspire to those principles.

I have always believed that the adjudication process is wanting. The compromise between handing the whole thing over to some independent judicial panel and leaving things as they are is to have an appeal akin to the independent expert panel that we have for the ICGS, but even that would have to be advised by a Member especially appointed for the purpose in serious and contested cases, to advise on how Parliament works and on the moral hazards of being a Member of Parliament.

I was mocked last week for suggesting that Members of Parliament need to learn more about this, but every profession in the world has training programmes to educate lawyers, doctors and other professional people on the moral hazards they will encounter in their career and how they should think about them. The General Medical Council website has a section on how to be a good doctor, and it sets out the principles. They are taught these things.

The problem we have in this House is that, culturally, we consider ourselves to be Members of a sovereign Parliament and to be beyond regulation and beyond question. Article 9 states that everything else is subsidiary to us. If anybody dares question us, well, we are elected, nobody dares gainsay us, and it is up to our voters. I am afraid no other profession in the country operates on that basis.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): My hon. Friend will know that the old military theorist Clausewitz said that war is the continuation of politics by other means. I have often turned that on its head: politics is war minus the shooting. There should be chivalry and absolute civility in the way we conduct ourselves. Although I agree with my hon. Friend, it is often missed that our profession is not like other professions. We are, in a sense, at war

without weapons in here. We should remember that and make sure our code of conduct is appropriate to the task that faces us.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. The problem is that, when we sit in the Tea Room, we talk about rules; we do not talk about values and principles. People wonder what the rules mean and how to stay within them—"That is allowed, but this is not allowed." We see it in financial regulation. When banks and financial services operate on the basis of what the rules are, they get around the rules. The rules are gamed, so they constantly have to adapt.

There is no discussion about whether something is a good and honourable thing to do, or whether it is something about which we should feel uncomfortable. The rules are meant to be a fallback. Actually, we should be talking to each other about why we are in politics, what our personal priorities are, what our personal morality is and how we navigate it.

I have very little time and there is much I could say, but I will not address all the proposals. Members complain about the code of conduct and about the commissioner, but this House voted for the code and the commissioner. This House is to blame for the system we have. If Members do not engage with the system at a moment like this, they have nobody to blame but themselves if they fall foul of it. To cry foul and say how it is all a fix and all a conspiracy does nobody any good.

On that point, because engagement tends to be low, the Committee will have to think much more about how we support those who are accused of falling foul of the code. I can think of cases—I will say no more than that—where if the individuals concerned had been taken aside by the right person and given the right advice, and if they had not run for their lawyers, got into a conflict with the commissioner and then questioned the whole system, their life would have turned out very different. Somehow, we need an independent system of support and advice—it cannot be the Whips—to make sure Members have the right advice.

On closing, I wish to draw attention to a particular piece of evidence that the Committee received. It has not had much attention, but I feel that it is by far the most useful thing that we have received. It is a response to our original issues and questions paper from Dr Claire Foster-Gilbert of the Westminster Abbey Institute. She was addressing the first question, "What values, attitudes and behaviours should the Code of Conduct for MPs seek to encourage or discourage?" She notes that the code reads as a document that first began as a response to financial misconduct. She said:

"It is cast as a regulatory instrument, which implies it is a set of rules which can be kept or broken."

It is now a mixture of rules, guidance and principles. She points out that no one can perfectly embody those principles; that would be impossible. Let us take, for example, selflessness, to which the hon. Member for Rhondda referred. Nobody can be totally selfless, least of all in politics. Our efforts in that regard can never be completely successful. Dr Foster-Gilbert points out:

"For MPs, faced with difficult choices on a daily basis, the task is to learn how to retain their integrity and behave selflessly, even while making those choices"—

about power, about competition with others, and about competition of ideas.

I will wind up now, but I really recommend that people read this particular piece of evidence, because our next inquiry will be much more about training and promotion of the code. People bridle against training, but we need to engage people in the conversation about what the code is for much more than we do.

3.56 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure and an honour to speak after such experienced Members: the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) and my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). I particularly thank my hon. Friend for the work he has done on chairing the Committee on Standards, and I thank the Members and his officers for this excellent report. I also thank my hon. Friend for the clarity and common sense that he has brought to the issue of standards in politics in numerous media interviews, as the issue of the conduct of MPs has had such prominence over the past few months. I do wonder, though, whether he has been taken off the Christmas card list of certain Government Ministers.

Anyone who saw the testimony of Ian Hislop at the Standards Committee last week would have seen at first-hand the labyrinthine nature of our existing transparency requirements, and how difficult they can be to navigate even for an experienced politics journalist let alone for members of the public. What is even more confusing is that there are standards that govern Members of this House, but not Government Ministers, and I shall pick up on that shortly.

I have stood, and been elected, in seven council elections and three parliamentary elections. At each point, when I was selected as a candidate by my party, and then on election, I had to sign up to agree to uphold the core standards expected of me by those who elected me. Eight years into my political career, in 1994, the Nolan principles of public life were established, codifying the essential behaviours expected of all in public life, and not only those elected to office. They gave us a clear set of defined principles; a defined code of conduct against which the conduct of anyone in public life can be measured and judged.

The Nolan principles were introduced at the height of sleaze—the cash-for-questions scandal, which had trapped an unpopular Prime Minister, who was facing revolt from his Back Benchers. That may sound familiar, but I have much greater faith in the integrity of John Major than I do in the current occupant of No.10. In fact, I very much doubt that the Prime Minister would be able to recite the Nolan principles, let alone stick to them.

This is about much more than our Prime Minister. The fish rots from the head and the disregard for ethics has spread across Government in the past few years. When the Prime Minister's adviser on standards found that a member of the Government had broken the ministerial code, what did the Prime Minister do? He refused to act, whereas his predecessor, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), had, when she was Prime Minister, done the opposite and sacked the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel).

Over recent weeks and months, I have had an increasing number of emails from constituents who have told me that, for the first time in their life when they have travelled abroad or talked to friends and family abroad, people have lamented the decline in our political standards

[Ruth Cadbury]

here in this Parliament, which is known across the world—perhaps incorrectly—as the mother of all Parliaments. Increasingly, scandal after scandal is weakening our reputation as a Parliament but also as a country across the world. Is that really global Britain in action? What we are experiencing now has happened in the past. Bad behaviour by a few politicians dragged us all down in the eyes of the public. How many doorsteps have we stood at where people say, “You’re all the same”? These scandals undermine us, undermine our Parliament and undermine our country.

The report has many excellent recommendations. I want to focus on the one raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda relating to gifts and hospitality, and the contradiction between the situation for Members—Opposition Members, Back Benchers and Committee Chairs—and that for Ministers. The Commissioner on Standards recommended that

“The Code should require Ministers who are also MPs to record in the Member’s Register the gifts, benefits and hospitality which they receive, including foreign visits, subject to the usual rules and thresholds.”

Take the hypothetical example of the gambling industry, which spends millions in engaging in lobbying all the time, including to oppose some often rather common sense reforms such as the limits on fixed odds betting terminals, which is the crack cocaine of gambling. If the gambling industry gave gifts or provided hospitality to a Back Bencher or Committee Chair, that Member would have to declare it within 28 days if it was worth more than £250, so tickets to the horseracing, with a hospitality box with food and drink, would have to be declared within 28 days. However, if the identical hospitality was provided to a Government Minister, who may well be making and signing off decisions about the gambling industry or horseracing, that gift would not have to be declared in the same way and at the same time. In the time between that and the Minister having to declare, they may push a Bill through Parliament, before the public know about the hospitality they had received.

In conclusion, MPs of all parties go into politics to make a difference, to be a voice for their constituents and to serve. I have worked across party lines on issues from the loan charge to cycling and walking, and I know that many Members across the House care deeply, but the failure to follow the rules and to clean up politics is corrosive. As the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) said, it is like battery acid sometimes. If we do not act and improve our standards, it will spread across all our politics and fuel cynicism and distrust about all of us in public life.

4.2 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I am not on the Committee. I have been on earlier renditions of it. It is interesting to watch developments and to read through the reports. I need to declare of course, in this debate of all debates, that I am a very, very, very part-time dentist.

The report is an interesting read. Mention has been made of Lord Nolan. If I can mention him again, he stated that the House of Commons must

“contain Members with a wide range of current experience which can contribute to its expertise.”

He also stated:

“A Parliament composed entirely of full-time professional politicians would not serve the best interests of democracy.”

If we are going to change the rules, we have to utilise that and move with it. The Chairman of the Committee, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), suggested, and I agree with him, that setting an arbitrary limit and policing an MP’s hours on their outside interests, whatever they may be and whether paid or not, is ludicrous and probably impossible. Many outside interests that I think should be declarable are not declarable. Ultimately, the decision on the balance of time spent, as the Chairman said, must remain in the hands of the electorate and that is in the report. Fortunately, the code, and I suspect most of the House, recognises the need for certain professions, in particular medical professions. People need to practise to retain their licence. The House should look at the benefits that MPs’ outside interests bring to knowledge and expertise of our debates and actions.

That point draws me to the paragraph in the report which recommends

“tightening the lobbying rules so that a Member who has a live financial interest is prevented from both initiating or participating in proceedings or approaches to ministers or officials that would confer, or seek to confer a benefit”.

If that is imposed as worded, it will mean that an MP cannot lobby for a direct concern for their benefit, if that MP is receiving a remuneration for the concern. At first sight, that makes sense. It is covered to a fair degree by the rules on transparency. As has been mentioned, a recent incident was a classic example of this, but I hope that the Committee can look at another side, in that such a tightening would lose the House the benefit of Members’ expertise.

There is a plethora of examples. Active farmers, with their family farm, will discuss farming and environment issues—they could be the Chairman of a relevant Select Committee—and will have to raise issues and take part in debates, but that rule would stop it. A practising criminal barrister discussing legal changes in the criminal law is another example. In past years—the Chairman, the hon. Member for Rhondda, might remember this—the House had the benefit of the expertise, at some length, of Bob Marshall-Andrews on such issues. On mental health issues, which were touched on in the previous debate, would we not wish to hear from the practising psychiatrist among us? Of course we would, but he would be banned.

I turn to my own case. For years, I have been lobbying in debates, seeing Ministers and so on in campaigning for the HPV vaccine to be extended to young boys as well as young girls. The Government eventually were persuaded and, as a result, there will be a considerable reduction in head and neck cancer. I cannot conceive of how it would be of financial interest to me, but equally, from some of the letters I have had, I can conceive of attempts to construct such an issue.

I have been involved in the campaign for fluoridation of water supplies for many years. As I said, I am a practising dentist. I am a member of the British Fluoridation Society, I have met Ministers and officials and I have spoken in debates on the issues. In fact, when a previous Labour Government were passing a new water Bill, I was asked by the then Labour Minister to help her in the debate when a misguided Welsh nationalist tried to attach a new clause to the Bill that would, in effect, have made the fluoridation of water supplies illegal.

Fluoridation is a preventive measure and, when widespread, would have an effect on day-to-day dental practice. From a financial view, it would perhaps be negative. We should be in a position to promote that, but if we go ahead with this measure, we may not be able to.

To touch on something that the Chairman of the Committee mentioned, I ask the Committee to look, even in a cursory manner, at other interests that perhaps should be declared, even though there is no obvious financial interest. For example, a number of us have dual nationality. I think we should declare that especially when the country from which we have come is included in debate. If it is New Zealand, I declare it. I do not need to—the moment I start speaking everybody knows. I had better make it clear at this point that the Tebbit rule does apply. When England play the All Blacks, I cheer for England, but I have already placed my money on the All Blacks.

Perhaps most importantly, I would like the Committee to consider whether Members can belong to campaigning organisations and speak or seek to influence Ministers without a declaration of their membership. I think that is wrong. Membership of CND when discussing nuclear issues or Campaign to Protect Rural England when discussing planning issues are two possible examples.

Finally, I ask the Committee, in considering the changes, not to tighten the bindings on MPs so as to stifle debate and stop us exercising the diverse knowledge that we all have. The key has to be transparency, not complexity.

4.9 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I place on record my thanks to the Chair of the Committee on Standards, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), members of the Committee, some of whom are here today, and the House staff who support them, for their work on our code of conduct. Clearly, this has not been an insignificant task and they have more hours to come, as they sift through the responses to the consultation, which today's debate forms part of. I noted the comments from the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) about his desire to be on the Committee. It is worth noting that smaller parties such as mine do not have that privilege in terms of being on Committees. Today's debate and other consultations are therefore our only way to engage.

My party and I support all moves to strengthen the standards that we follow in this House. Given the extent of the report, it would be impossible to speak on every finding and proposal. Without wishing to pre-empt the findings of the Committee's consultation, I wish to speak on just one rule today, which relates to whether a Member can vote on a matter that directly concerns them as an individual. One of the most unedifying aspects of the events of 3 November and the vote on the Owen Paterson report was that he was able to vote against his own suspension from this House. The fact that he was able to do so shows a worrying gap in our rules, about which there was rightly a degree of public outcry.

As with much in this place, there is not a straightforward process to be followed. Paragraph 5.17 of "Erskine May" states that a Member's vote can be disallowed when a Member has a

"direct, immediate and personal financial interest in a question".

That clearly implies that it is improper for a Member to vote on a matter in which they have an intrinsic vested interest in the outcome. A Member's own suspension is clearly a matter in which they have a direct interest. However, the phrasing of the guidance in "Erskine May" is about objecting to votes after the fact and requires another Member to table a motion immediately after that vote. That is clearly impractical, as it requires Members to have sight of where others are voting at the time of the Division and then to have a seat in the Chamber to move the motion.

I was also told anecdotally after the vote on 3 November and by the Procedure Committee in correspondence published on its website that there is a House convention that, although a Member may speak at the start of a debate on their suspension, they should then subsequently withdraw. The clear implication is that the Member would not return to vote in any relevant Division. There is no way, however, in which to enforce this convention. Conventions only last until someone chooses to breach them and the outcome, as always, is a reduced standard of conduct. I was reassured in my correspondence with the Procedure Committee and in my meeting with its Chair, the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), that the Committee saw the logic of putting the arrangement on to a firmer footing and the question is just, what is the best way of doing this: either an amendment of the Standing Orders or a change to the code of conduct.

The report of the Standards Committee, in all its 120-odd pages, does look at voting but focuses on whether Members should be able to vote where they have relevant financial interests. Although a suspension from the House would have a financial implication for a Member from a pay perspective, the discussion is focused on where Members have business interests or investments. The report is silent on the far more straightforward question of whether a Member should be able to vote on their own disciplinary proceedings. The convention says they should not and "Erskine May" says a vote could be disallowed, yet we saw this happen. I put it to the House that it is time for this very simple rule to be put on a formal basis and I hope that the Standards Committee will consider adopting the change in its final report.

Whether someone has been elected to this place in 2019, as I was, and as other Standards Committee members who are here today were, or in 1975, as the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) was—incidentally, he was one of the two Conservative MPs to support my Standing Order No. 24 application for an emergency debate on standards in November last year—each and every one of us should care about how we conduct ourselves in this place and the means by which we are held to account for that conduct. Our constituents expect it and they simply deserve nothing less.

4.13 pm

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I pay tribute to the Standards Committee for a very interesting and incredibly useful report, and to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for his time yesterday; we were charging around the Lobby together trying to discuss this issue, which is close to my heart. He knows that in my opinion we need a much bigger

[*Dame Andrea Leadsom*]

review of standards in this place and I want to take a few brief moments to explain why. First and foremost, our constituents want to be able to hold us all to account. Secondly, we want to hold ourselves to account. Lots of colleagues from across the House have said, "We want to behave in a selfless way, with high levels of integrity. We want to be those honourable men and women that we are called to be as Members of Parliament." We all know of colleagues who have been absolutely devastated—their mental health has been destroyed; they have felt bitterly ashamed; they have left this place under a cloud—because of things they have done. They were not doing those things deliberately or maliciously, but for whatever reason, they have not been up to the standard that this House requires, so it is right that those punishments take place.

For our constituents, too, it is absolutely vital that they understand what they can require their Member of Parliament to do. In these days of 24/7 social media, 24/7 news and theyworkforyou.com, with all of the accusations that are flying at us, all Members will agree: we get constituents saying, "I require you to vote this way", and when we do not do so, they literally rant at us. We have constituents demanding that we take up their case when we are completely unable to do so because it is a matter for another constituency MP, and what those constituents will do—as this report clearly sets out—is go to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, saying, "This MP is a piece of rubbish. I want to complain about them." What they get back from the PCS is, "I am very sorry. That is outside of my remit." That undermines confidence and trust in Members of Parliament, and it is a classic example of how our constituents need to understand what they can expect of us.

What the Standards Committee seeks to do is uphold those principles and those rules, and to judge us against them. That is quite right and very worthy, but it is neither clear to our constituents what we should be doing—because there is no articulation anywhere of what the job of an MP is—nor whether we are here as their delegates or as their representatives. How many times have we heard people say, "I want you to vote this way"? My answer is, "I have 82,000 voters. They do not all agree with you. If you can get the other 81,999 to accept your view, I will vote in line with that absolute confirmation of how my constituents want me to vote." There is a fundamental problem with how our constituents can hold us to account, and there is a lot more that we should be doing as a Parliament with things like theyworkforyou.com and lobby campaigns. Somebody will literally send me and all of us an email saying, "Dear (insert name of Member of Parliament here). Yours sincerely, (insert your name here)." I will reply to them courteously, and they will say, "Why have you written to me about this?" I have to prove to them that it is because they wrote to me in the first place, so there are some mad things going on, Madam Deputy Speaker—you are laughing because, of course, you get it too, Deputy Speaker or not. There are real problems.

The other key point I want to make is that in this House, we set up the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who is in his place, was a part of it. It was entirely cross-party, it carried the

support of this House, and what it was intended to do—rather than what the Standards Committee does, which is set out the principles and judge Members against them—was change the culture of this place. It was intended to make sure that people took on board a behaviour code that did not apply just to MPs, but to everybody who works here. There are 15,000 people who work here; there are only 650 MPs, and there are problems at every level in this place, as we saw only too well when the terrible #MeToo scandal hit Westminster. That is in large part down to the multiplicity of contracts and reporting lines that we have, and the HR processes that we do or do not have. The ICGS set out very clearly that, based on the evidence we took, 80% of the problems we were suffering in this House were workplace grievance issues. Yes, 20% were very serious bullying and sexual harassment issues, but nevertheless we have a culture issue, and the ICGS set out to change that.

It also set out, absolutely fundamentally, the need for proper induction courses for everybody who comes here, so that they know where the Table Office is and what it does; they know what sitting hours are and how to read an Order Paper; and, very importantly, they know what kind of behaviour they are expected to show to each other. Is it appropriate to go down to the bar with a junior member of staff and chat them up? As one Member has already said, issues such as those are taught in business environments: those things are made very clear, not just to MPs but to everybody who comes here, but it is not so at the moment in this place, even though the ICGS said it should be. The second point is about training as a sanction: rather than always reverting to an apology in this Chamber, which serves to devastate a Member of Parliament, or a sacking of a member of staff—which obviously devastates them—what is wrong with implementing the training that the ICGS envisaged? It is simply not happening.

The final point is about exit interviews. We know that there is huge turnover, and in some MPs' offices there is very great turnover. We all know who they are, but why are their staff not undergoing exit interviews when they leave, so that measures can be put in place, not always to punish, humiliate and destroy people's mental health, but to make things better, to make this a Parliament that everybody can be proud of? As Members we agonise about how we drag ourselves through the gutter all the time. None of us wants that to be the case. It is soul-destroying for all of us. In recent days we have heard some really good Members say, "I've had enough. I'm leaving this place." A new colleague came to me and said, "I spent 25 years working in the public sector. I don't want to risk being an MP for any longer, because if you make a mistake, your name and good reputation will be taken through the gutter and you'll never live it down."

It is slightly as if we have created a system of disaster, and our constituents cannot rely on it either. I would like to see a big review to address what an MP is there for. How are we actually helping MPs and those who work for us to do their job better, and what can we do to actually make people proud of their MPs and of their Parliament?

4.21 pm

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): It is an honour to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), who spoke with clarity and purpose. I enjoyed her contribution.

I want to place on the record my thanks to the Chair of the Standards Committee, the Clerks and the lay and parliamentary members. I serve on the Committee, although I was absent from the recent oral evidence sessions and therefore apologise. My back was spasming in a way that meant that I could neither sit down nor walk, which was not helpful.

I was a little disappointed that the opening remarks did not give some context to this report, which is something we have to do on a regular basis and—given the nature of the 2015-17 and 2017-19 Parliaments—is an overdue piece of work. As we have heard from various contributors, the requirements are constantly shifting and evolving, meaning that when the Standards Committee is doing its very best to solve one problem, something else can appear. I listened mindfully to the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) about the need to change culture as well as the rules and regulations. In terms of the level of interest, it is depressing, as he rightly pointed out, that there are so few participants present for a debate on an issue relevant to the governance of the whole House. I fear that the same is true of the consultation.

As the Chair of the Committee made clear, its members are not in unanimous agreement on many of the proposals. We agreed to put them forward, but it is important to note that our views differ. I have made my own written submission, so I will try to be as brief as possible in addressing the contents of the document.

On banning paid parliamentary advice, consultancy or strategy services, I think it is quite clear how we got there. The Chair of the Committee was quite kind in his comments about the reasonable definition provided by the 2018 report by the Committee on Standards in Public Life. I think that it is an entirely unworkable and deeply unhelpful suggestion. If the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House will forgive me, I think that the Standards Committee has ended up in a slightly more sensible and workable position than any of the political parties have managed. That is to our credit.

I am disappointed that my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) is not here, but I think he would have focused on the review of processes and roles, and on the need for natural justice and fairness. I am sure that all those words would have appeared in his contribution, and we have appointed a senior judicial figure to ensure that our process is as good as possible.

I agree with what the Chair of the Committee said about appeals in his opening remarks, but I also think it is important to the Committee, as much as to anybody else, that we be reassured that our processes are as fair as possible. One thing I have mentioned perhaps more often than anyone else in the Committee, is the need to ensure that investigations happen swiftly and end swiftly. There are numerous reasons why that has not always happened, and this is certainly not a dig at the commissioner for her work, because she has worked through some remarkably difficult circumstances and cases. However, we must bear in mind that when a Member of this House is under investigation, it places a great strain and burden on them, and it is unfair for that process to drag on for a long period of time. I look to the Leader of the House to say that we must ensure that any resources

that are required to speed up that process should be prioritised, because it is important that the investigations happen swiftly.

I treat some of the proposals with a bit of caution: the main one has already been referred to by the Chair of the Committee, and it relates to matters in the Chamber being referred to the commissioner. That has been widely misunderstood to mean, “If you say something that is out of line, you can now be referred to the commissioner and she will slap you down.” That was absolutely not the Committee’s intention. There is a bit of wording in the report that, with the benefit of hindsight, I think we drafted poorly, but it is a matter of quite grave importance that staff members of this House are not necessarily entitled to have things referred to the ICGS or the commissioner if they happen during the proceedings of this House—in a Division, a Select Committee or elsewhere. When that proposal is explained, I think it will have widespread support, but it has been seen as an attack on freedom of speech when it is quite the opposite. I very much welcome the Chair’s comments on that front.

One other thing I want to mention is the feedback on written contracts. It has been pointed out to me that those who do public sector roles often sign a standard contract that has been agreed by trade unions. Therefore, getting a bespoke contract that would say that someone cannot lobby or be involved in certain activities might be difficult, and that is something the Committee did not necessarily consider.

There are two things I am against: first, the bespoke Nolan principles outlined in the report. As they are, the Nolan principles are widely understood, welcomed and easily applied. I think the suggestions that the Committee has put forward are too prescriptive and create an overlap between the rules and the principles that is unhelpful and creates some confusion. I also think they are a little bit pious. The Chair of the Committee looks shocked, but it is one of his favourite words.

Secondly, I disagree strongly with the proposal on the ministerial register of interests. Ministers operate in a separate role and under a separate code when they act in a ministerial capacity, and therefore the Committee is somewhat overreaching. From what I have seen on the Committee, that is not a particularly large problem, and it feels that we are straying into overreach. Other than that, I think this has been a very helpful debate.

4.28 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): As an aside, while I was preparing to write this speech, a former member of the Committee on Standards sent me a WhatsApp message. I had asked him for advice on whether I should join the Committee, and he said, “I’ve been on this Committee for a couple of years, haven’t seen much action, don’t anticipate that will change—don’t expect to be too busy, in fact you might want to think about joining another Committee too.” How wrong he was.

Standards in Parliament and the conduct of MPs seem to have rarely been out of the news over the past six months. I must say it is a tremendous shame that there are not more hon. Members present for this debate, because this is one of the most important issues that our constituents consider. There can be few more contentious votes in recent times, I am afraid, than the one relating to the former Member for North Shropshire.

[Andy Carter]

The inquiry into the review of the code of conduct, which all hon. Members are expected to follow, is very timely and welcome. It is a 120-page report and I want to focus on just three or four things. First, however, I want to make a point I have made in other debates: we should look at every opportunity to simplify the rules. I mentioned in a previous debate that I get confused as a member of the Standards Committee, and I think my local newspaper ran a headline saying the standards rules were confused and “complicated”. I say this because there are 12 or 13 different codes and sets of guidance that MPs are required to follow, all in different places and most of them adjudicated by different people, and it is very difficult, particularly for new Members of Parliament, to know exactly where to go to get the right information so that they do not make mistakes. That was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), and training and guidance at all stages of our experience in Parliament and reminders of the sort of things that are expected from a Member of Parliament are very important.

On second jobs—although for some Members it is about not just second jobs, but third or fourth jobs as well—the Committee heard from a number of witnesses and the conclusion I think almost everybody reached after hearing from them is that this is not a simple issue to resolve. Perhaps the most compelling evidence for that view was received from the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), who has a private Member’s Bill to ban second jobs. That convinced me that there was absolutely no simple answer. Frankly, it would carve out lots of exceptions to allow people to do all kinds of second jobs, therefore not banning second jobs. We need to think very carefully before legislating, and my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) made the point that we are enriched by having professionals from different disciplines in the House who can contribute to debates.

When I was first elected two years ago, I quickly realised that I did not have time to hold down a second job. My family would not have seen me if I had tried to take on another job in addition to being the Member of Parliament for a very busy constituency, but I do understand that some MPs have time to do other things. Indeed, in some cases they need to do other things to maintain professional qualifications—doctors or accountants, for example—and we should recognise that that is a good thing. However, I equally think that anybody who is recruited on to a board because of their experience here needs to ask why they are being recruited. That is exactly the same as people offering that input into here and Members being required to put input into commercial businesses. We should think very carefully about whether we should require Members of Parliament to hold contracts with such organisations. I think that what is expected of Members of Parliament should be set out so that there is proper transparency.

However, I agree that the electorate are the ultimate decision maker in terms of the work undertaken by MPs. If they believe that their representative focuses more on outside interests than standing up for constituents, they should use the ballot box to make changes when the opportunities arise.

I want to talk briefly about a couple of other points. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher) mentioned the respect principles to accompany the Nolan principles. Everyone in public life is expected to follow the guidelines set out by the Committee on Standards in Public Life and I do not think that a new principle needs to be added there. I agree with the intention, but I think the sentiments are met elsewhere within the seven principles, so doing that could add confusion.

The hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) mentioned conventions and I think there is a convention that colleagues on the Standards Committee do not talk to the press about issues in relation to the Committee. We perhaps need a bit more guidance on that. It is important that every member of the Committee acts impartially and without political notions, and I try to hold to that. Making comments to the media about MP colleagues and then finding that colleague in front of the Committee is at some point going to cause problems for the Committee.

I believe that all Members of Parliament recognise that it is a privilege to sit in this House of Commons, and with that privilege comes a set of responsibilities and expectations. Members of the public rightly expect high standards of integrity and behaviour from those they elect to govern.

4.34 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on the way he introduced it and on the body of work that he and his Committee have done. It is a fantastic document and a very useful signpost to the type of work we need to do to improve our code of conduct across the House. Our standards and code of conduct are our rules; they are in effect an interface with the electorate we serve. That is how people understand our work; they are the rules that electors appreciate and respect about how we do our work. It is imperative that, when we look at the rules, we manage to take into account what the electors expect of us as Members of Parliament.

The hon. Member for Rhondda was right that our code of conduct and standards have never been so much in the heat of public light and open to such inspection and even controversy. I congratulate the Committee on dealing with the issue in the heat that has been turned on it just now. I suppose we know exactly the moment, day and time when all this changed dramatically. It was about 2 o’clock on Wednesday 3 November when the Leader of the House got to his feet to approve the third report of the Committee on Standards. Of course, he had no intention of approving that particular report. In fact, he did most everything he could to undermine and neuter what was included in the report. We heard things like, “It was an unfair process.” He referred to the lack of examination of witnesses, the lack of an investigatory panel, the length of time taken and, critically, the absence of a right of appeal. It was the first time in history—certainly the first time in my 21 years in this House—that the Government had in effect attempted to overturn a recommendation of the Standards Committee.

More than that, the Leader of House supported an amendment that would have established a Select Committee to revise and review our Standing Orders, undermining and potentially wrecking the very essence of the Standards

Committee and its work. This Committee would have had a Government Chair with a Government majority. To call it a kangaroo court would be a massive disrespect to Skippy the bush kangaroo and all his antipodean colleagues. It was a bizarre and clumsy attempt to get Owen Paterson off the hook and, even worse, in the days that followed there were sustained and appalling attacks on the Commissioner for Standards herself. The public hated it and they were appalled at what was going on in this House. It was no wonder that two days later the Leader of the House came scurrying back to the House to have the proposal reviewed and overturned.

What the Leader of the House did that day was to open a Pandora's box of sleaze, corruption and double standards. It was just sitting there undisturbed since the 1990s and the days of "Back to my place" and cash for questions. The Government should have known not to tamper with it because this box was marked with a skull and crossbones with the very clear message, "Under no circumstances open". But not only did they open it they took a crowbar to it, and out it all came in a spewing noxious torrent—the whole slurry of cash for access, paid advocacy, cash for honours, cash for questions, second jobs and PPE contracts for their pals. As they tried to put the lid back on, it erupted again, but this time it was like the ark in Indiana Jones when the contents ascended in a hellish mass obliterating everyone in its wake. Parties at No.10, cakes at No.10, do as I say, not as I do, DJs in the basement, birthday cakes, wine and cheese, police investigations, civil servants, and now we even discover that the Prime Minister's chief of policy has just resigned because of the awful comment about Jimmy Savile that was made by the Prime Minister himself. How the Leader of the House must wish that he had a time machine to go back to that hour and minute on 3 November and that his plan with the Chief Whip to save their pal had been overturned.

The Standards Committee has had to pick this up. It has done well. I do not have time to go over all the details, but I want to pick up on a couple of points that the hon. Member for Rhondda highlighted. The first is the proposal on appeals. The hon. Gentleman has given us a number of options. I exhort him to stick to the status quo. It is right that the commissioner investigates and the Committee considers. That has been the principle at the heart of this, and I urge him to continue with it. I do not think we should reward the Government for what they tried to do by having any sort of look at appeals, and I hope the hon. Gentleman sticks to that.

I support the Committee in its option on second jobs. I would prefer to see a written contract for a second job, but I can live with the proposal that a contract detailing duties and an undertaking that these duties cannot include lobbying Ministers is right. The main thing that irks, frustrates and consumes our constituents like nothing else is the veracity of the things that are said in this House. This is now the new frontline in our standards, and it has to be addressed. Members of the public now believe that a Minister or Member of Parliament can say anything in this House, regardless of its relationship to fact and actuality—

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: I do not have time to give way to the hon. Gentleman, as I have to leave time for the Front Benchers.

I know that this is precarious territory, and the hon. Member for Rhondda has outlined a number of the difficulties, but this is something that we have to resolve. We cannot have a situation where Ministers can say practically anything and expect to be believed but if anyone challenges it, they end up with the prospect of being flung out of the House. That cannot go on. I want to end by congratulating the Committee. This is a great report and we have a good basis for going forward. I hope that this debate has helped the hon. Gentleman in forming his view when considering the final report.

4.40 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): This has been an excellent debate, and I find myself observing that every speaker has brought some light to it. Even if I have not agreed with every word, I have appreciated the spirit in which it has been conducted. It is always a great pleasure to take part in any debate introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). As well as demonstrating his intelligence and his ability to get to the nub of an argument, he is also incredibly poetic as he speaks. It has been a great pleasure to take part in the debate, and I congratulate him and all the Committee members—it is great to see so many here—on their very hard work on something that matters so much.

Virtually everyone here seems to agree that standards matter. They are a fundamental cornerstone of our democracy. We may disagree about the wording, and we may debate these issues, but I echo what the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) said about needing more of us in here debating them. It matters so much that many Members seem to get engaged in the process only when they fall foul of it, but standards really do matter and they should be something that we aspire to. It has been a long review, with the Committee looking at the code twice.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Given that it is just a fact that people do not come to debates such as these, what is the alternative? Do we need to have a proactive engagement policy, rather like the way we introduce new Members to the House now?

Thangam Debbonaire: The Committee has made recommendations about more engagement and more training, and we are going to have to work really hard at that. It behoves all of us here today who clearly do believe in the system to also be the ambassadors for the system. We have to be the ambassadors for it in all its glory.

Others have spoken about the backdrop to the debate and about what happened with the former Member for North Shropshire, so I have cut all that from my speech. I just want to highlight a couple of key points. I have written to the Committee in full with a response to all its recommendations. That is winging its way to my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and his Committee even as we speak. There are so many recommendations that I strongly support, including those on clarity, on training, on finding more ways to engage colleagues and on ensuring that the independence of the Standards Commissioner and the Standards Committee is maintained. This will help to restore and buttress trust in our Parliament, which is so important.

A key recommendation is that there should be an outright ban on second jobs as parliamentary advisers. That is Labour policy and I definitely agree that there

[Thangam Debbonaire]

should be an outright ban on any Member acting as a paid parliamentary adviser, consultant or strategist—whatever we call it. This has been a recommendation since 2018 from the Committee on Standards in Public Life. It is long overdue, and I strongly support it. Similarly, there is a recommendation for a contract for outside work with explicit statements. I take the point made by the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher) about the difficulty with contracts, but I still think that it is a difficulty we should push through with. This would help to dispel the misconception that MPs are for hire in any way. It is our constituents we are here to serve, not outside interests, so I strongly support that recommendation.

Mark Fletcher *rose*—

Thangam Debbonaire: I am not going to take the hon. Gentleman's intervention, because I feel that I should honour Madam Deputy Speaker's stricture.

The recommendation to clarify the criteria for serious wrong exemption in the lobbying rules would help to make clearer what constitutes a conflict of interest. In the case I have referred to, the Committee said that that exemption should be treated as a narrow exemption, not a wide loophole. I of course support the recommendation that there should be clarification.

We need to ensure that there is consistency when it comes to standards for MPs and Government Ministers. I therefore strongly support the recommendation, detailed by my hon. Friend, about ensuring that ministerial gifts and benefits can be found in the same place as information about MPs. I also support the recommendation about transparency and ease of use of the website. My goodness, it is sometimes hard to find even one's own details in full.

I feel that any strengthening of the system—I know that this is outwith the scope of the report—should be accompanied by a strengthening of the ministerial code. The last Labour Government legislated to clean up politics after the sleaze of the 1990s, with various significant measures relating to, for instance, freedom of information, the ministerial code itself, and public registers. We have put forward a plan that the next Labour Government would introduce to strengthen the system, but of course we cannot wait a day longer to protect and strengthen our standards systems. I urge all Members who have not yet read the report to read it in detail. In fact, we could have a quiz—a party game. Who knows what paragraph 174 says? I do. We could also encourage our colleagues to respond to the request for consultation—I think we have another week or so to go.

I hope that the Government have learnt from the fiasco that surrounded the former Member of Parliament for North Shropshire, and I hope that all of us can get behind a new, invigorated system of standards. Wherever we end up, we have to salute and support it, because it says so much about our democracy that we have these standards and pride ourselves on trying to live up to them.

4.46 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and the Committee on Standards for their assiduous work in conducting a review of the Members'

code of conduct. I am pleased to participate in today's debate, and I agree with the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), that it has been of very high quality, featuring many important contributions from across the House. I hope that it will be viewed as part of the evidence collected through the consultation process.

The hon. Member for Rhondda gave a good account of the complex issues that the Committee has had cause to consider in its review. The code of conduct for MPs rightly remains a matter for Parliament and, as we have said before, it is for the House of Commons to take forward any work on these issues on a cross-party basis. The Government will provide a response in due course on matters relating to the Executive and wider Government policy, but in the meantime I should like to make the following points.

The Government believe that, as public office holders, Members of Parliament have a duty to act in accordance with the seven principles of public life. These ethical principles form the foundation of the members' code of conduct, and their value lies in the fact that they are applied consistently and commonly to all holders of public office, including Ministers. It is the fact that they are applied universally that gives these principles strength and meaning. I believe that we should maintain a consistent set of principles rather than tinkering with these commonly understood standards.

The Committee has also recommended that an additional principle of "respect" be added to the code of conduct. It is my view that adjustments of this kind, which would undermine the universality of the principles of public life, are undesirable. As drafted, the parliamentary behaviour code strikes the right balance between ensuring that all members of the parliamentary community and visitors to this place are treated with "dignity, courtesy and respect", and ensuring that different views can be freely exchanged in debate, and Members can fulfil their constitutional duty of representing their constituents.

As for the scope of the code and the potential for consideration of public complaints about the use of social media by Members, the Government believe that in the course of debate, whether online or in person, the views of all participants can be freely expressed and treated with tolerance. It is important to distinguish between strongly felt political debate on the one hand, and unlawful acts of abuse, intimidation and violence that seek to suppress free speech on the other.

We therefore do not support further strictures in this regard within the code. Such changes would risk undermining the fundamental principles of our constitution, or unduly limit the ability of Members to express their views. However, I would note that there is also a role for political parties in this area. The Government response to the report from the Committee on Standards in Public Life on tackling intimidation in public life asserted that each political party should put in place its own individual, tailored code of conduct, which should set out the standards of behaviour expected of its members and representatives. All the political parties represented in the House of Commons now have their own codes of conduct.

The Standards Committee has also looked at the existing rules on the registration and declaration of interests to ensure that they are clear and up to date. The Government see merit in several of those proposals, but at this stage I simply observe that the rules regulating

the interests of Members and Ministers are necessarily distinct. The separation of powers is a fundamental constitutional principle and it remains the Government's view that benefits received by Ministers in their ministerial capacity should not form part of the Members' register.

I will give an example. In the unlikely event that I were made Minister for Sport—it is unlikely because this speech has been cleared by Downing Street, which did not question the thought that it was—I would see it as a great privilege to go to a test match at Lord's. I would also receive many other invitations, however, and I am afraid to say that it would be more of a duty to go to the FA cup final, even though many other Members may think that a great privilege. So what Ministers do may be duty rather than pleasure, whereas Members do not have to accept invitations in that sphere, or certainly not normally.

Chris Bryant: I sort of understand the point that the Leader of the House is making, but why should the public not just know? Why should the public have to know about an ordinary MP going to the football or the cricket or whatever, and know the details of them receiving hospitality worth more than £300 within 28 days, but when it is a Minister, they do not have to know for months and months, and in some cases they never get to know the details at all?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The speed of registration is a very fair point, but it is a governmental rather than a parliamentary matter. In terms of the actual declaration, it could give a misleading impression that a Minister, particularly one in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, was attending a constant round of entertainments that were, in fact, entirely in the course of their public duties. That would be very different from a Member of Parliament who had no obligation and was purely attending, if at the same events, for his or her own pleasure.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: The Leader of the House has not been in opposition, but if he was the Opposition spokesman, he would have the same obligation to attend the same event, but would be subject to the House of Commons rules rather than the ministerial ones. What is the difference?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Being in opposition is different from being in government. We have a separation between Ministers and Parliament. The separation of powers is an important constitutional principle.

I will move on to the question of the work undertaken by MPs outside Parliament and how that could, or should, be limited. The Government value the work of the Standards Committee and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards in applying the conduct rules that the House has endorsed. That is why we support the work being undertaken to

“introduce robust new measures to empower the standards system in Parliament”.

It is evident that, further to the 17 November resolution of the House, there is cross-party support for reforms of the rules on outside interests.

The Government remain firmly of the view that, as the Committee on Standards in Public Life recommended in 2018, Members should be banned from accepting any paid work to provide services as a parliamentary strategist,

adviser or consultant. There seems to be widespread consensus on that point. The Committee has collected a wide range of evidence from expert witnesses, including the Committee on Standards in Public Life, to consider how reasonable limits on outside work could be defined. As we have discovered during this debate, that is a knotty question without a simple or straightforward answer.

It is apparent that successive generations of parliamentarians have obtained relevant experience through outside work. It is also clear that several parliamentarians continue to use that expertise to make valuable contributions to other areas of public life. First and foremost, however, we are here to represent our constituents and any work outside this place must not come at the expense of their interests. It is sensible that our rules reflect that Members must always prioritise their parliamentary work and serve the electorate who returned them to this place and who will, of course, judge them.

The existing rules require Members to declare their outside interests and positions, but do not explicitly prevent the holding of certain positions, notwithstanding the proposed limits on accepting any paid work to provide services as a parliamentary strategist, adviser or consultant. To go beyond MPs' central practice of declaration and instead place limits on Members undertaking a much broader range of activity through the application of hard thresholds of time or money would represent a substantive change to the definition of an MP's role.

As such, there is a question as to whether it would be constitutional to make such adjustments through the Members' code, or whether legislation would be required. It would arguably be a change to the conditions of membership of this House of similar significance to the provisions set out in the House of Commons Disqualification Act 1975, which provides that those who hold certain offices cannot be Members of this House.

More widely, in order for the standards system to operate effectively, it is essential that it is both robust and fair and also compatible with the constitutional principles that have ensured that this place works at its best. Parliament sits at the heart of our constitutional arrangements and it is of utmost importance that Members are able to participate without artificial impediments in debates on contentious issues that are of great import to the electorate. The compatibility of the standards system with the core principles and concepts of fairness and natural justice needs to be considered with care, so I welcome the appointment of the right hon. Sir Ernest Ryder to conduct a review of fairness and natural justice in the standards system.

Throughout the debate, right hon. and hon. Members made a number of interesting and important speeches, which I am confident the Standards Committee will consider carefully. It is through a shared understanding of the constitutional framework in which we operate, as well as formal rules, that we will ensure that our standards system commands the confidence both of the public and of Members on a cross-party basis. I therefore hope that when the Committee publishes its final proposals, they will form the basis for further discussion and final conclusions.

4.56 pm

Chris Bryant: I am grateful to all those who contributed to the debate and look forward to seeing the Government's written submission when it comes. Of course, I hope the Leader of the House will come to give evidence to the Committee as well. We are interested in hearing from slightly more Members than were able to attend this afternoon, although I understand that lots of Members have constituency responsibilities and need to get to their constituencies, some of which, like mine, are even further away than Somerset.

It seems to me that we need to work through a few issues, one of which is whether we have specific descriptors for the Nolan principles. The Committee on Standards in Public Life—which, of course, originally came up with the Nolan principles—has advocated that, reviewed our version and was supportive of it. We also need to look at the question of respect, or respectfulness, and how that plays out. I have listened to lots of Members on that.

There may be a knotty problem that we still need to resolve in respect of whether Ministers should be treated differently. I remember the Leader of the House coming to our Committee and saying that he did not really believe that the separation of powers was an important principle, but I noticed that today he said it is—we sometimes choose our arguments according to the day of the week. My important principle is that all MPs should be treated fairly and equally under the rules. It would be for the benefit of most Ministers if all Members were treated exactly the same and had to declare everything in the same way.

It would be in the interests of the public if the House was able to make our current register much more readable and accessible. It is strange that we have to go to TheyWorkForYou to find out the history of our register of interests. We cannot go through the parliamentary system without looking at 20 different documents. If someone wants to look at ministerial registers, they have to look, every year, at 122 online documents. I just do not think that, in the end, that does us any favours as a House.

I repeat the point that I made earlier about the issue of telling the truth and lying. The Leader of the House used precisely the right word: it is a knotty one. Like many of the issues we on the Committee face, these issues are not susceptible to very simple answers. I get very cross and abandon my piety when people try to present—*[Interruption.]* Yes, I have often abandoned my piety; that is a good point. I get cross when people try to pretend that some of these issues are clear cut; they are not.

Finally, the House has heard from three other Committee members, and we work hard on all these issues, but the lay members bring to the Committee a fascinating outside look. Many of them are from professional backgrounds of which we know nothing and that makes for a much more effective Committee, so I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), who set it up in that way.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Committee on Standards' Review of the Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is there a means by which you could draw to the attention of the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), that Mr Speaker made a statement in which he explained “there are means by which accusations of lying may be brought before the House”?—*[Official Report, 2 February 2022; Vol. 708, c. 266.]*

I do not think the SNP spokesman has read that statement or understood it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. He has rather achieved what he set out to achieve, and he has continued the debate.

Wendy Chamberlain: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 31 January, during the Sue Gray update statement, the Prime Minister said the Government “have been cutting crime by 14%”.—*[Official Report, 31 January 2022; Vol. 708, c. 24.]*

I understand the Prime Minister took that information from a Home Office news release, which in two places presented the statistics to give a positive picture of trends in crime in England and Wales based on a fall in total crime, excluding fraud and computer misuse, of 17%.

In a letter sent to my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), the UK Statistics Authority confirmed that, if fraud and computer misuse are counted, as they should be, total crime in fact increased by 14% between the year ending September 2019 and the year ending September 2021.

I seek your guidance on how we can get clarity on those remarks from both the Prime Minister and the Home Office.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. Although the Chair is not responsible for the content of contributions made by Ministers, I am sure the concern has been heard on the Treasury Bench. If an error has been made in this instance, I am sure a Minister will seek to correct it as quickly as possible.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. There is a great deal of interest in statistics. I cannot remember whether the Chancellor or the Cabinet Office is responsible for the Office for National Statistics, but perhaps we could have a Question Time on statistics so that we can bandy around our favourite ones and have them answered by Ministers.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Father of the House for that point of order. Luckily, the Leader of the House is sitting in front of him, and I am sure he will have heard his interesting request.

Kazakhstan: Anti-corruption Sanctions

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Scott Mann.)

5.2 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I thank Mr Speaker for granting this debate and the Minister for joining us. I also thank a host of civil society experts who have helped me—too many to name—but I give special thanks to Professor John Heathershaw of Exeter University, Adam Hug of the Foreign Policy Centre and Sue Hawley of Spotlight on Corruption.

Earlier this week, the Foreign Secretary announced welcome moves to toughen up the sanctions regime against Russia, but we should not be waiting for a potential military crisis before we act against illicit finance at home and corruption overseas. We should act and use the powers we have now.

Today, I want to shine a light on foreign corruption in another state, not simply because that is important in itself, but because I want to highlight the UK's role in facilitating shameful wrongdoing. Put simply, Britain enables kleptocracy. My ask of the Government is twofold. First, they should act proactively by sanctioning wrongdoers in Kazakhstan. Secondly, now that they have committed to tabling an economic crime Bill in the next Session, they must ensure the Bill's provisions are fit for purpose, tough, effective and appropriate so that Britain can show by what we do that we are seriously committed to fighting the scourge of dirty money.

It is 30 years since Kazakhstan, a multi-ethnic, resource-rich central Asian state, emerged from the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In those years, Kazakhstan has, by some indicators, been a success. Its GDP growth has outstripped that of many of its neighbours, including Russia. Living standards are higher and until the 2010s Kazakhstan appeared to enjoy political stability.

But there is another side to the Kazakhstan story. The country is ruled by a kleptocratic elite that has grown rich off the back of money stolen from its people. Until 2019, its autocratic dictator was Nursultan Nazarbayev. In Kazakhstan, just 162 people own 55% of the wealth—mostly members of Nazarbayev's family or close associates. The country has a poor human rights record and little media freedom.

As early as 2006, Jonathan Winer, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Law Enforcement in the Clinton Administration, said:

"I can't think of a leader in the free world as notoriously corrupt as Nazarbayev... We've known about his corruption for at least 15 years".

Yet in Britain, we turned a blind eye, ignored the corruption and helped the Kazakh regime launder and spend its dirty money.

Three examples confirm my view. Between 2008 and 2015, we issued 205 Kazakh kleptocrats with golden visas to settle with their dirty money in the UK, which was the fifth most common country for users of the Tier 1 Investor scheme. A recent Chatham House report reveals that the Kazakh elite owns over half a billion pounds of property in the UK. Around £330 million of that belongs to Nazarbayev's extended family, including Sunninghill Park, allegedly bought by Nazarbayev's son-in-law for £15 million—£3 million over the asking

price. The Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project has revealed how Nazarbayev secretly controls four charitable foundations with at least \$7.8 billion-worth of assets, invested in everything from hotels to banks. This global fortune is part-owned through a UK listed holding company set up in 2020—Jusan Technologies.

We have opened our borders, our property market and our financial structures to the Kazakh ruling class, enabling them to launder their illicit wealth and spend it. Worse, we do not even enforce our existing laws against any of this wrongdoing.

Why does this matter now? Because the fault lines of the corrupt Kazakh political elite have exploded. Protests, initially triggered by the soaring costs of liquidised petroleum gas, quickly developed into a national movement against the governing regime. The response from the new President, Tokayev, allegedly handpicked for the job by Nazarbayev, was initially to distance himself from the old regime. He then requested support from Russia, which sent in troops. Finally, on 7 January, he deployed the military against the protesters, with a "shoot to kill without warning" order. Protesters, most of whom were peaceful citizens, were gunned down without so much as a warning shot. According to some experts, this shocking, violent suppression has left 225 dead, 4,500 injured and 10,000 arrested.

That terrible loss of life in Kazakhstan should lead to a moment of reflection for us in Britain. We are complicit in what is happening in Kazakhstan. Our lack of transparency over foreign property ownership, our lax regulatory regime and our weak enforcement agencies have all aided and abetted the Kazakh elite.

Yet it is not too late for us to act. The Government have put in place a new regime of anti-corruption sanctions to complement our Magnitsky sanctions. They allow us to designate foreign, corrupt actors, freeze their UK assets, stop them entering Britain and limit their access to our financial or legal enablers. Sanctions are powerful tools, but, Minister, they must be used. That is why the Government should impose sanctions on the Kazakh oligarchs, who have systematically robbed their people to line their own pockets. The recent violence demonstrates the true cost of kleptocracy. It is surely up to us, in the UK, the jurisdiction that has done so much to facilitate corruption in Kazakhstan, to act and hold these individuals to account.

Our all-party group on anti-corruption and responsible tax is co-operating with representatives from legislatures in Europe and America. We have formed the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance against Kleptocracy, and together we are urging Governments in the UK, the US and the EU to issue sanctions against the kleptocrats of Kazakhstan. Today, I am calling for action from the UK to designate anti-corruption sanctions against the following individuals, whom I shall name, all of whom are allegedly involved in asset seizure and bribery. The details I will provide are limited because of time, but every story is shocking.

There is Timur Kulibayev, his wife Din ra Nazarbayeva—the daughter of Nazarbayev—and their associate Arvind Tikku. Evidence suggests that Kulibayev abused his position to accrue vast wealth. In 2020, the *Financial Times* showed that Kulibayev benefited from a secret scheme to divert profits from big state pipeline contracts. He has faced money laundering and bribery investigations

[Dame Margaret Hodge]

in other jurisdictions. His worth, according to *Forbes*, is \$2.9 billion, and he owns at least £60 million of real estate here in the UK.

There is Dariga Nazarbayeva and her rumoured husband Kairat Sharipbayev. Dariga is Nazarbayev's eldest daughter. Her empire, estimated by *Forbes* at \$595 million, is hidden in an incredibly complex system of offshore companies, foundations and trusts. Three of her London properties were subject to a failed unexplained wealth order, but investigators at Source Material allege that Nazarbayeva may have misled the UK High Court. Meanwhile, Sharipbayev is allegedly one of the beneficiaries of a \$334 million fraud at Kazakh bank Bank RBK, which has been labelled

“the bank of the Nazarbayev family”.

There is Nurali Aliyev, son of Dariga and grandson of the former ruler. Aliyev was appointed deputy chairman of a private Kazakh bank called Nurbank—after the grandfather—at the age of 21, and chairman at 22. UK court documents show he received a \$65 million loan from a bank in 2008, through a company which then made a further loan. According to Nurali's lawyers, he used some of those funds to purchase a £39.5 million house in Bishops Avenue.

There is Karim Massimov, and his associate Aigul Nuriyeva. Massimov is a former Prime Minister of Kazakhstan who has been subject to bribery allegations, including from UK listed companies, as reported in the *FT*. He was also implicated in allegations of bribery by Airbus for the purchase of 45 helicopters. Nuriyeva is a Kazakh banker and alleged proxy for Massimov, who is himself implicated in major bribery scandals totalling \$64 million with the Swedish telecoms company Teli.

Vladimir Kim is Kazakhstan's richest man, worth some \$4.3 billion. He chaired Kazakhmys plc, the first Kazakh company to list on the London Stock Exchange. A Global Witness report claimed that Kim acted as a proxy owner, and that Nazarbayev actually controlled the company. In 2017, Kim's daughter Kamila, then 18, bought three flats worth \$60 million in Knightsbridge. His associate, Eduard Ogay, is co-owner of Kazakhmys—sorry if I am pronouncing these names wrongly—and is alleged to have given bribes to the country's Prime Minister.

Kenes Rakishev is a mysteriously wealthy Kazakh businessman worth up to \$1.6 billion, with close ties to the political elite, and a close associate of the head of the Chechen Republic, who has been sanctioned by the US.

Sauat Mynbayev was Minister for energy and mineral resources, yet he secretly co-owned a Bermuda-based company worth \$3 billion, which won public contracts in Kazakhstan despite the obvious conflicts of interest with his ministerial role. His wife and son own property in the UK.

Alexander Mashkevich, Patokh Chodiev and an associate who died were known as the “Trio”, renowned for their ownership of Eurasian Natural Resources Corporation, a Kazakh-based mining company also listed on the London Stock Exchange. In 2013, the Serious Fraud Office launched a criminal investigation into the company, following allegations of bribery to African political figures.

Bulat Utemuratov is a former chief of staff to Nazarbayev. A US diplomatic cable reported allegations that Utemuratov was the President's “personal financial manager” and his own website assesses his personal wealth at \$3.9 billion.

Bolat Nazarbayev is Nursultan Nazarbayev's very wealthy brother. In 2008, he purchased a £20 million apartment in Manhattan's ultra-exclusive Plaza Hotel. He is accused of involvement in armed groups that helped to spark the January violence.

Akhmetzhan Yesimov, chairman of the sovereign wealth fund, allegedly abused his position to give his former son-in-law, Galimzhan Yessenov, related party loans through secretive British Virgin Islands companies to buy a UK entity called Kazphosphate. Yessenov is now one of Kazakhstan's richest men.

Kairat Boranbayev's daughter married Nazarbayev's grandson—it is all in the family. He held a number of positions, including one involved in the notoriously corrupt transit of gas from Turkmenistan. He owns a £25.4 million mansion in an exclusive gated community in Virginia Water, a £60 million flat in One Hyde Park, and three luxury apartments, worth more than £15 million, in Knightsbridge.

Then there is Alexander Klebanov and his son Yakov. Alexander has an estimated wealth of \$374 million and chairs the Central Asian Electric Power Corporation. The two act as financial proxies for the former president's family, and are thought to have helped Dariga Nazarbayeva to avoid the unexplained wealth order.

Nurlan Nigmatulin, Baurzhan Baibek and Marat Beketayev are senior figures in the ruling Nur Otan party and are close associates of Nazarbayev. They are embedded in supporting corruption and allegedly responsible for human rights abuses.

A UK High Court has highlighted how Aliya Nazarbayeva, Nazarbayev's youngest daughter, moved over \$300 million out of the country through complex offshore structures, including in the BVI. Aidan Karibzhanov is accused by his former wife of having profited from his position as a banker by selling the Kazakhstan national telecoms company and, I quote,

“privatization of public assets resulting in huge profits to politically connected insiders at the expense of the state”.

Kairat Satybaldy and Samat Abish are Nazarbayev's nephews, enjoying significant wealth through offshore structures. Both are key players in Nazarbayev's inner circle, involved in the current power struggle that is undermining peace and security.

I have named those people. Imposing sanctions on this corrupt elite will not of itself root out evil practices or lead to a radical democratic transformation in Kazakhstan, but it will demonstrate that we mean what we say when we commit to fighting dirty money and corruption. The cost of inaction is high. The reputation of London and our financial services sector is already sullied, with the UK seen as the jurisdiction of choice for dirty money. With swift action, we can begin to restore the idea of a good global Britain and demonstrate to our allies that we will not provide a safe haven for kleptocrats or oligarchs.

I ask the Minister whether he will consider the individuals I have named and impose sanctions on those who have stolen from their country, laundered their money here, used UK structures to hide their ill-gotten gains, used

the golden visa route to gain entry to the UK or committed human rights abuses. Will he act now? Only by strengthening transparency, legislating for tougher regulations and ensuring consistent, strong enforcement will we be able to hold our heads up high again as a trusted jurisdiction that lives by the highest standards. We must finally turn the warm words of successive Governments into firm actions in the promised economic crime Bill. Will the Minister confirm that the Bill will be considered this year? If the Government fail yet again on these two fronts, the only ones who will be delighted are people such as the criminal kleptocrats from Kazakhstan who will be laughing all the way to the bank.

5.20 pm

The Minister for the Middle East, North Africa and North America (James Cleverly): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) for securing the debate and I pay tribute to the work that she has done on these complex issues both in her former role as a Select Committee Chair and as chair of the all-party group on anti-corruption and responsible tax. As my noble Friend Lord Ahmad, the Minister with responsibility for south and central Asia, is in the other place, it is my pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government.

This month, the UK celebrated 30 years of diplomatic relations with Kazakhstan, our largest partner in central Asia. Over the years, we have built a strong partnership in areas such as oil and gas investment, education and financial services, as well as promoting human rights and democratic values. We have had real success in encouraging a more open business environment in Kazakhstan, including through the Astana International Financial Centre.

Hon. Members—though few are here—will have witnessed the violent clashes that took place in January after initially peaceful protests in western Kazakhstan over increased fuel prices. As the right hon. Lady said, the latest estimates are that more than 200 people died during those clashes. There were reports of organised attacks on property and law enforcement officers, and almost 10,000 people were detained. I am sure that she will join me and others in roundly condemning the violence and loss of life.

My noble Friend Lord Ahmad has been engaged intensively on these issues, speaking to senior Kazakh contacts last month, including President Tokayev's special representative on 14 January. In each of these calls, the Minister has underlined the importance of Kazakhstan respecting its international human rights commitments. President Tokayev has called what happened an "attempted coup" and we are urgently seeking further information about that very serious development. We welcome the President's decision to establish an investigative commission to ascertain what led to these unprecedented events and loss of life. We support the Kazakh authorities' commitment that this will be an effective and transparent investigation and have encouraged them to consider international and independent expertise.

In his public remarks, the President was clear that the original peaceful protests were based on legitimate grievances about the socioeconomic situation and that urgent economic reform is needed. We support that message and we seek opportunities, with our international partners, to support those reforms.

President Tokayev has also been critical of an existing social system that has seen economic growth largely benefit a small number of very rich people in society, as the right hon. Lady highlighted. We are well aware of reports on the alleged acquisition of assets by wealthy members of elite Kazakh society, including of substantial property holdings here in the UK. It is, of course, the role of law enforcement agencies to investigate any specific allegations of wrongdoing, as she said.

As a leading financial services centre, the UK can, unfortunately, be the destination for the proceeds of corruption, despite findings from the Financial Action Task Force that the UK has one of the strongest systems to combat money laundering and terrorist financing of more than 60 countries assessed to date. Consequently, the integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy committed to take stronger action to bear down on illicit finance, including by bolstering the National Economic Crime Centre and working with our closest allies, such as the United States, to maximise our collective impact against this common threat.

The recent spending review has put new resources behind that commitment: £42 million for economic crime reform from now until 2025. That is in addition to £63 million for Companies House reform and the introduction of the economic crime (anti-money laundering) levy, which will raise around £100 million per year from the private sector, to combat economic crime from 2023. These additional resources will significantly enhance our ability to tackle transnational corruption and illicit finance.

Since 2006, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has funded the National Crime Agency's international corruption unit, a world-renowned law enforcement capability focused on investigating corruption from developing countries with UK links. Since funding started in 2006, ICU investigations have resulted in the conviction of 30 people and companies for corruption offences. It has also frozen, confiscated or returned to developing countries more than £1.1 billion-worth of stolen assets.

In addition, the UK leads and hosts the International Anti-Corruption Coordination Centre, which brings together specialist law enforcement officers from multiple agencies around the world to tackle allegations of grand corruption. The IACCC significantly enhances our ability to investigate complex, multi-jurisdictional corruption cases. Since its launch in 2017, it has provided support on 88 investigations.

In 2019, the UK launched its economic crime plan that provides a joined-up public and private sector response to economic crime. The success of our public-private partnership is perfectly demonstrated by the work of the joint money laundering intelligence taskforce, a mechanism that enables law enforcement and the financial sector to work more closely together to detect, prevent and disrupt money laundering and economic crime. To date, the joint money laundering intelligence taskforce has helped more than 600 law enforcement investigations. This has directly contributed to over 150 arrests and the seizure of more than £34 million in illicit funds.

Finally, in April last year, the UK launched the global anti-corruption sanctions regime, which the right hon. Lady mentioned in her remarks. This allows the Government to impose asset freezes and travel bans on

[James Cleverly]

those involved in serious corruption around the world, and it sends a message that the UK will not tolerate those individuals, or their ill-gotten gains, in our country. The regime does not target countries, but instead targets those individuals or organisations that are responsible. We believe that this is a strong, personal deterrent and it has been used so far to sanction 27 individuals in 10 different countries.

Collectively, these investments significantly enhance our ability to bring corrupt actors to justice. They also send a clear message that we will use the full force of our capabilities to bear down on those who seek to use the UK as a destination for their illegitimate wealth.

Criminals, corrupt elites and individuals who threaten our security are not welcome in the UK.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I am extremely grateful to the Minister, but he has given me a very general response. I named more than 20 individuals, many of whom are members of the same family. Will he undertake to investigate the circumstances that I briefly outlined, and undertake that, if I am correct, those individuals will face sanctions under the new regime?

James Cleverly: The right hon. Lady will, I am sure, understand that it can sometimes be counterproductive to go into details about what future sanctions designations the UK Government might undertake, but I can absolutely assure her that my officials, and indeed the House, will have taken note of the individuals she highlighted in her speech.

In relation to Kazakhstan, or indeed any other country, our law enforcement agencies continue to monitor and, if necessary, investigate particular cases where circumstances require. We know that corruption and illicit finance can have a devastating impact on states and citizens by undermining democracy, bankrolling authoritarian agendas, and enabling serious and organised crime. The UK has shown, on the world stage, that it has both the means and the will to promote responsible financial behaviour. We have shown that we stand ready to take action, domestically and internationally, wherever necessary. I am sure you will agree, Madam Deputy Speaker, that we must now stand together to show that corruption has no place in this country.

Question put and agreed to.

5.30 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 3 February 2022

[ANDREW ROSINDELL *in the Chair*]

Cumberlege Report

1.30 pm

Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind hon. Members to observe social distancing and to wear masks.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of implementation of the recommendations of the Cumberlege Report.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I have secured a debate about fulfilling the recommendations of the Cumberlege report because I do not feel that we are making enough progress. We had a debate on the Floor of the House in July and a written ministerial statement on 21 July. To stay in order, Mr Rosindell, I will only say that the Minister's answer to the debate and the written ministerial statement were disappointing, in many ways. In my opening remarks, I will seek to address why I believe that to be the case and, fundamentally, ask for certain updates. We are talking about people whose lives have been destroyed. Many hon. and right hon. Members will bring their own examples about various parts of the report, whether they are about Primodos, sodium valproate or mesh, but I will focus my comments on mesh.

I will not spend too much time going over the examples I gave during the debate in July, which can be looked up in *Hansard*, but I will say that people were given an operation that many did not need, which many were convinced that they should have. Some people did not even know it had happened to them. It took many years for the problems that arose to become apparent, and so those people have effectively been dismissed.

Like many Members, I have constituents who have had their lives stopped, especially women, although I will mention how the issue affects men as well. One constituent, who I have mentioned before, was a physiotherapist in her 40s who had had a child. She had mild incontinence after giving birth and was told to have the mesh implant, which she went ahead and did. Her entire life has been destroyed by that. Trying to remove it was described to her as being like "trying to take hair out of chewing gum". We should consider that image when we think about the difficulty of the operation. We must not forget that the NHS did this, and the NHS has a responsibility to deal with it. I will make that point several times.

I have been contacted by a lady who is a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall). Her name is Paula Goss and both she and he have given me permission to talk about her case. She set up Rectopexy Mesh Victims and Support in March 2019 after she was unable to find much research or information about the meshes that she had had put in. The group now has over 1,100 members, as well as members who have sacrocolpopexy vaginal mesh and hernia mesh. She is the ambassador and advocate for rectopexy and hernia mesh on the Mesh UK Charitable Trust, which has a further 2,000 members.

Paula had rectopexy mesh in 2014 as she was unable to clear her bowels. She was ill-informed by the now dismissed surgeon, who, as she found out from her notes, inserted three meshes—in the bowel, vagina and posterior. She says:

"All mesh types don't necessarily show complications straightaway. My Pre mesh insertion issues started again around 9 months after the op, in which I was passed from pillar to post by all medical professionals saying my issues were the menopause or in my head. This went on from 2015 until September 2018 when I was admitted to hospital with a blocked bowel and bladder and had to have enemas and catheters, still they would not connect this to the mesh, upon doing a CT scan at this time they also found a large ovarian tumour, it was then discussed by my gynae oncologist at the BRI and Southmead NBT to do a joint op to remove the tumour and the mesh, due to the incompetence and lack of mesh removal experience at Southmead I ended up having the ovarian tumour removal in January 2019. Thankfully, after testing it was a large benign fibroma, following up with Southmead they then stated that they wouldn't remove my mesh but would do an op to give me a permanent stoma—again, brushed aside and fobbed off, I sought a second opinion in London privately, whilst we are by no means rich, you can't put a price on your health...I had to pay £32,000 for my removal, it took over 10 hours and they could not get all of it...two protacks in particular sit very close to the bifurcation of the inferior vena cava on the left and the common iliac on the right. Pre mesh removal I was found to have a heart murmur and I suffered pericarditis quite a few times. My histology on my meshes showed that I was not a candidate for polypropylene and should not have this inserted again...When I discovered I had hernias again I was neglected by the local hospital who at first refused to do a scan, saying I must have an ulcer. It was thanks to my private mesh removal surgeon who contacted my GP and insisted that I was referred for a CT which then clearly showed two large incisional hernias.

The consultant at Southmead stated he would only fix my hernias with polypropylene mesh. After I told him that I couldn't have that, there was no option but to again look down the private route. Thankfully, my colorectal mesh removal surgeon was able to do this and a date was set for 6 January 2020. However, my hernia started to strangulate and I was luckily rushed to London by my husband, and had this op done on 28 November 2019. This cost £43,000.

This operation was by far the toughest and took a long time to get over, due to ending up with a seroma and now a hiatus hernia due to the trauma to my abdomen.

My journey has not been, and is still not, plain sailing, but I am one of thousands.

Whilst vaginal mesh gets a lot of coverage, ours does not. Rectopexy affects men, women and children...All three main types of mesh need to be included and talked about—bowel mesh, vaginal mesh...sacrocolpopexy and colporrhaphy vaginal mesh and hernia mesh...One of our rectopexy mesh ladies found out that the surgeon who put mesh in also removed her ovary without consent, she sadly committed suicide due to this event.

One of our rectopexy patients was just 15 when she had her mesh inserted. She's early 20s now and now suffers complications and doesn't even know if she will ever be able to have children.

We have other ladies in their 20s and early 30s suffering, who may not be able to have children.

We have many rectopexy bowel men on our sites who feel they have nowhere to go and no one who will listen to them.

This is the same for all hernia mesh victims too.

There are many real victims' journeys that need to be listened to and taken seriously."

That is what the report did, and why it was so appreciated by the victims, as they were finally being taken seriously. That is where the report's value lies. Today, I once again push for it to be implemented in full as far as possible, and for recommendation 3 about redress, recommendation 4 and recommendation 5 to be reconsidered.

[Alec Shelbrooke]

Recommendation 1 was for an apology. That apology was received in July 2020, given by the Government, but, as good as it was, their actions depend on whether they can justify what they are doing on recommendation 9. Recommendation 2 is:

“The appointment of a Patient Safety Commissioner who would be an independent public leader with a statutory responsibility. The Commissioner would champion the value of listening to patients and promoting users’ perspectives in seeking improvements to patient safety around the use of medicines and medical devices.” The Government accept recommendation 2, and I ask the Minister for the latest update on that appointment. On 2 December last year, in the other place, the noble Baroness Cumberlege asked Her Majesty’s Government “when the process to appoint the Patient Safety Commissioner will commence; and when they expect the Commissioner to be in post.”

In response, the noble Baroness Chisholm of Owlpen said:

“My Lords, we are making good progress towards appointing the first patient safety commissioner for England. We expect the appointment of the postholder by spring 2022.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 2 December 2021; Vol. 816, c. 1443.]

As I said, I would like an update on where we are in that process.

Recommendation 3 is that:

“A new independent Redress Agency for those harmed by medicines and medical devices should be created based on models operating effectively in other countries. The Redress Agency will administer decisions using a non-adversarial process with determinations based on avoidable harm looking at systemic failings, rather than blaming individuals.”

The Government do not accept recommendation 3. As set out in the Government’s statement,

“We have no current plans for a redress agency...We do not believe it is necessary to create a new agency for redress as it is already possible for the Government and others to provide redress for specific issues where that is considered necessary. Neither do we believe that creating an agency would succeed in making products safer as the report suggests, or that grouping existing redress schemes through a single front door would add value for harmed patients.”—[*Official Report*, 21 July 2021; Vol. 699, c. 72WS.]

I do not accept that it is already possible to provide redress where necessary, because my inbox, and I am sure those of several right hon. and hon. Members, suggests that that is simply not true. It is too vague and takes too long. When I talk about recommendation 5, I will discuss where that issue comes to a head.

I come back to my point, which is that the NHS did this to people. I have said it before and I say it again: the problem is very similar to the thalidomide scandal. Eventually we got justice for thalidomide victims. People are just being fobbed off—I have many examples—and that is exactly what happened with thalidomide. Mr Rosindell, can you imagine living an active life, as we all do, and the NHS recommending something that meant that you could no longer take part in what you were doing? Imagine being physically and mentally restricted and unable to fulfil your life’s ambitions. A full quango might not need to be set up, but at the very least we need a ringfenced department in the NHS to bring those areas together.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Baroness Cumberlege specifically states in her report that her terms of reference prevented her from talking about individual compensation and redress. Is my right hon.

Friend suspicious, like me and probably many others, that that was specifically written into the plan so that she could not do what my right hon. Friend is asking for?

Alec Shelbrooke: That is where we have to dig into recommendation 4:

“Separate schemes should be set up for each intervention—HPTs, valproate and pelvic mesh—to meet the cost of providing additional care and support to those who have experienced avoidable harm and are eligible to claim”.

The Government do not accept recommendation 4. That is exactly the same situation as with thalidomide. One of my earliest campaigns in 2012 was to extend the grant to victims, and my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) took that campaign further to make it a permanent grant. People will not recover from what happened, whether it was drug-induced or operation-induced.

My constituent who has had mesh removed emailed me only today to say that four years down the line things are better, but they have not improved to the point where she can really live her life. She says she is mentally exhausted and does not want to go on. She had a thriving physiotherapy career that she cannot go back to. She is only in her 40s and has the rest of her life to live. The Government have a responsibility because the Government run the NHS. I interchange the words “NHS” and “Government”, but the NHS is the Government. That is where this situation falls on the Minister:

“While the Government are sympathetic to the experiences of those patients who gave evidence to the report, our priority is to improve the future safety of medicines and medical devices.”—[*Official Report*, 21 July 2021; Vol. 699, c. 72WS.]

Trying to prevent further catastrophe is obviously very important—that is one thing—but thousands of people will suffer for the rest of their lives thanks to this treatment.

I will draw the distinction between this surgery and breast-enhancement surgery. Many people have had that done privately and then when there have been complications, they have had the operation to sort it out on the NHS. There is often a lot of debate around whether that is right or wrong. That is not where I want to go today. However, if we are willing to do that for things that people have had done privately, why are we not willing to redress the issues of people who have had things done by the NHS?

We are talking about women from their teens all the way up. Some people think the problem is with the elderly end of the population, but we are talking about those in their teens upwards. As I said, we did recognise the situation with thalidomide. I know that costs come into it, but there is a moral responsibility to redress the situation.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. Does he agree that there is a moral responsibility? Once the Government—whatever Government that is and wherever they are—have committed to review such a profound issue, and have essentially marched people up to the top of the hill, giving them faith and hope, they must then follow through. Leaving people in a state of suspended animation for such a long time, when they have already suffered so much, is just not acceptable.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am most grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention. She summarises the entirety of what we are trying to achieve. When I put in the application for the debate, I found no difficulty at all in getting sponsors who were one third Conservative, one third Labour and one third SNP. This is not about the colour of the Government. It is about the NHS, which will be managed through all colours of Government, and has been throughout its life. It is the responsibility of this place, and part of who we are, to do the right thing by people.

I ask the Minister to look at the thalidomide grant scheme and translate it across to those who, as a direct result of the issues raised, will not be able to fulfil their earning potential and will have to deal with physical restrictions and pain for the rest of their lives.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): As well as compensation, which I think is what the right hon. Gentleman was talking about with “redress”, the Scottish Government, at least, are now progressing with a Bill to set money aside for people to get mesh removed through private surgery, fully funded by the Scottish Government. Does he think that that should also be considered by the UK Government?

Alec Shelbrooke: Again, I am most grateful for that intervention, because people are having to turn to private care to get that surgery done—often by the same surgeons. There has always been a conversation about the NHS commissioning private medicine to help it, particularly when it comes to clearing the backlogs caused by the pandemic. That is important. I will come on to that question in my comments about where we are going.

Recommendation 5 says:

“Networks of specialist centres should be set up to provide comprehensive treatment, care and advice for those affected by implanted mesh; and separately for those adversely affected by medications taken during pregnancy.”

The Government accept the first part of recommendation 5, on specialist centres for those adversely affected by mesh. I regret to tell my hon. Friend the Minister that it is not working. I have a document that I will read from Kath Sansom of Sling the Mesh. She sent me this information. These are women’s voices, in just January 2022. An 83-year-old says:

“I am disappointed. I was expecting help but just offered pain relief and physio. And I now have red inflamed abdominal inflammation. I wanted to know if all these problems were the mesh—the answer was that they don’t know.”

A 64-year-old says:

“Not sure about anyone else, my experience hasn’t been particularly good. For me the wait goes on and on. Offered pain management, didn’t get anything only offered physio. In 14 years I have had enough physio to last a lifetime. Latest offer yet another camera in the bladder, that makes 4 now. First removal 2019, been waiting ever since for stage 2. I feel the longer it goes on, they hope I will give up having surgery at 64 years old.”

Others say:

“After a very long wait to see a specialist in the mesh centre, having scans etc. was told no real problems”—

and—

“Mesh centres are a piece of paper over a cavernous crack!”

Another person says:

“I feel mesh centres are giving us false hope—and then the realisation that it’s all been pointless. They actually admitted at Nottingham that they would watch Leicester removing my mesh

so that they could learn how to remove a TOT mesh! They looked disappointed when I said there was no way I was thinking of having it removed. I feel like I would have been an experiment. I’m scared.”

Another says:

“I waited 12 months from referral by GP for my first appointment, then it has taken 3 years of various tests and appointments to get on the surgery removal waiting list. I have been on that list for 15 months so far. In that time, I lost my job that I’d had for over 16 years due to sickness record, I’ve been on the waiting list for pain management for over 12 months, and I am gradually able to do less and less due to the constant pain.”

Someone else says:

“Nottingham mesh centre same pro mesh surgeons that put in mesh in charge of centre referring patients to nearby Leicester Hospital for operation—what’s all that about!! It’s OK having Specialist Mesh Centres, but these doctors need to be trained by surgeons that are doing good jobs.

I’ve been hurt once by these surgeons that put mesh in, I’m not letting anyone near me unless they have done lots of successful removals. The sad thing is, because only 4 or 5 great surgeons do removals, you have to pay private, because their waiting lists are so long.”

Others say:

“Kath, can you highlight the LONG waiting times please and referral to pain management, which has a long waiting list—we are talking years overall when all we want is this damned mesh removing sooner rather than later”

and

“Mesh centres, what mesh centres? Same doctors been under for years. No faith at all. Only know how to put it in, not take it out.”

Another person says:

“Been waiting 15 months, and still no appointment. Was referred to UCHL, which I have heard nothing from, even though the hospital referring has resent the referral a couple of times. Been told I have to go to my local now, which is Southampton which I have heard not one positive outcome from, so basically, funding it myself with credit cards as can’t put up with the pain anymore”

while another says:

“Suffered for years before I found out what it was. My GP referred me five years ago—doctor yawned in my face & denied it was plastic. Told me it was tape. Sent me round in circles for lots of tests and visited 8 different hospitals for mainly painful procedures before I was finally sent to St Mary’s (Manchester) 3 years ago for a translabial scan.

Was sent to Wythenshawe then back to St Mary’s & told I had to see pain management clinic before I could be offered a full removal.

Covid cancelled all appointments in 2020 then I had an SNS trial implant at Northern General Christmas ’21 for bowel control (it failed) & spinal fusion L4/5 year ago for stenosis then got wound sepsis, so back in DRI for two weeks in lockdown last March. Sure the mesh damage caused all this!”

Somebody else says:

“There is a stark contrast between NHS and private, it shouldn’t be like this. I saw Professor Hashim on 1st October, he examined me, confirmed issues and said he could offer me full or partial removal. If I had been able to cough up the money I would probably be getting removal February or March. I am in his area for the Bristol mesh centre so my consultant referred me straight to him after reading his report. I have not had any communication from Southmead Bristol yet, everything I am hearing about Bristol now is that I am going to have to go through the pain clinic and try steroids etc first. Why do we have to jump through these hoops with the same surgeon just because we can’t afford...£15,000?”

Another says:

“Gynaecologist was dismissive and stated that women like me are depriving other women from benefitting from it.”

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): My right hon. Friend has made that point a number of a times during his speech, and it is worth highlighting. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister will do some great work on the women's health strategy, but time and again my right hon. Friend has said that women's voices are being ignored and dismissed. They are told that they are imagining things and that it is in their heads. It is not good enough.

Alec Shelbrooke: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. In fact, I will later make a couple of points on what I have discovered about women's health. The way women are treated is quite appalling.

Another person says:

"I had my TVT in Exeter 12 years ago. Exeter consultant in 2020 told me I couldn't be referred to Bristol. He said he would refer me to UCLH but I never heard from them, I rang in 2021 to be told UCLH hadn't received any referral but they then put me on their wait list from when I'd been told the referral was made. I then heard nothing from them for ages so I paid for a private consultant at Bristol to be told I could have been referred to Bristol on the NHS in the first place. Bristol requested NHS tests in Exeter which were done in August 2021 and they referred me back to Bristol in October, so I am now on Bristol NHS list for removal".

Somebody else says:

"Took 4 years to be referred to specialist mesh centre, after a lot of pushing and pushing for it, referred to Royal Victoria Hospital in Newcastle upon Tyne. The mesh centre was no better, more lies, gaslighting and a really appalling treatment and total indifference, lots and lots of mistakes, cancelled appointments and no regard for any pain or suffering."

Another person says:

"Told too dangerous to remove...left in agony...self-catheterising, lost job, pain management referral but they are behind 12 months ...invisible and invalid is how I feel...is this my life at 54?"

Somebody else says:

"I went for a consultation for removal in 2020 had a scan then asked to contact his secretary when I'd had an MRI which I did in December 2020. Now still waiting for them to contact me. I leave messages and nothing happens."

I could go on and on and on, and I am sure that many other right hon. and hon. Members will be raising similar cases. What I want the Minister to comment on in today's debate is this. There is now, from the relevant royal colleges, the "Purpose Statement for the Mesh Complications Management Training Pathway". That statement outlines several areas, but I will highlight just the "Mesh Complication Management credential". Its subheading is "Professional Identity: Clinical Expert" and it states:

"The doctor has the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for clinical assessment of patients presenting with suspected mesh-implant complications...The doctor is able to investigate mesh complications, and interpret the results of tests, appropriately...The doctor is competent in non-surgical management of mesh complications...The doctor is competent to undertake mesh removal surgery as part of a multidisciplinary team".

This is progress, but I think we can all understand that there is going to be a long time around that, so I say this to the Minister. Can the House please have regular updates on how this training process is going, within the royal colleges, for surgeons. We need to understand what the process is and how long it is taking to try to deal with the main issue.

That brings me to the other parts of recommendation 5 in the report of the independent medicines and medical devices safety review. The written ministerial statement in response said:

"Recognising the need for enhanced data collection on pelvic mesh, the Government in 2018 announced the provision of £1.1 million for the development of a comprehensive database of urogynaecological procedures, including vaginal mesh, to treat pelvic organ prolapse and stress urinary incontinence. I can update the House that the pelvic floor information system has started to receive live data, including historical data from July 2017 onwards, with an initial focus on supporting specialist services to report every pelvic floor and comparative procedure to this national database.

The report of the IMMDS review also recommends that the information system is accompanied by a retrospective audit of mesh procedures, and by the development of a patient reported outcome measure (PROM) or patient reported experience measure (PREM). I am pleased to announce to the House today that the Government accept both these recommendations. NHS Digital has been commissioned to scope and deliver the retrospective audit. Subject to receiving high quality research bids, a new validated PROM for pelvic mesh procedures will be commissioned through the National Institute of Health Research in 2022."—[*Official Report*, 21 July 2021; Vol. 699, c. 73WS.]

Again, I ask the Minister whether she can update us on progress in these areas. After today's debate, could she speak to her Department about ensuring, even if it is just through a written ministerial statement, that there is a regular update on the progress being made?

I will give a summary of the points that I have made. GPs are unaware of mesh complication centres and the referral process. Many patients are denied access and offered physio and pain management instead. They pay thousands of pounds for private care. They experience extremely long delays for appointments. Many women end up seeing their implanting surgeons, who then dismiss them. That leads to further deterioration in their physical and mental health. There is a lack of experience, particularly in mesh removal. There are only around four to five surgeons in the UK who can do mesh removal. There is no post-op aftercare.

More positively, on recommendations 6 and 7, the Government announced that the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency

"has initiated a substantial programme of work to improve how it listens and responds to patients and the public, to develop a more responsive system for reporting adverse incidents, and to strengthen the evidence to support timely and robust decisions that protect patient safety."

Recommendation 7 was:

"A central patient-identifiable database should be created by collecting key details of the implantation of all devices at the time of the operation. This can be linked to specifically created registers to research and audit the outcomes both in terms of the device safety and patient reported outcomes measures."

The Government accepted both recommendations. Again, I ask the Minister for an update.

Recommendation 8 states:

"Transparency of payments made to clinicians needs to improve. The register of the General Medical Council (GMC) should be expanded to include a list of financial and non-pecuniary interests for all doctors, as well as doctors' particular clinical interests and their recognised and accredited specialisms. In addition, there should be mandatory reporting for the pharmaceutical and medical device industries of payments made to teaching hospitals, research institutions and individual clinicians."

The Government said that they accepted the recommendation in principle:

“We agree that lists of doctors’ interests should be publicly available, but we do not think that the GMC register is the best place to hold this information”,

so “publications of interest” should be held by healthcare providers. Having approved the recommendation, how is that progressing and how easy is patient access?

Finally, we get to recommendation 9:

“The Government should immediately set up a task force to implement this Review’s recommendations. Its first task should be to set out a timeline for their implementation.”

The Government accepted the recommendation in part.

Having probed the recommendations to open the debate, I ask the Minister whether she and her Department are able to say positively that they are meeting recommendation 9. Are the recommendations being implemented properly and is she revisiting the recommendations rejected by the Department initially? We can all recognise from the examples that I have given that the mesh centres are not working, that people’s lives have been destroyed and that they will need support throughout their lives. We cannot just draw a line, have a year zero and say that we hope such things do not happen again. We have to move forward.

Drawing on what my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) said and on my research, it is clear to me that the NHS is constantly failing women. During the pandemic, I read a report—unfortunately, I have not been able to reference this since, so it is open to challenge—stating that gynaecological surgeons were taken off their operating theatres for longer than any other surgeons, being kept on the frontline of the covid wards.

That says exactly where the problem in the NHS lies. That comes up not just in this debate, but next week, in another debate, on problems with endometriosis. It seems that the NHS is—I do not say this in a positive way—gender-blind to the needs of women and the complications that occur. It is an attitude, a built-in psychology, that we will have to address, and we can only start to do so if we take all the aspects of this report seriously.

Although men have mesh issues too, this debate is dominated fundamentally by women’s health. It speaks to that wider assessment of NHS priorities on women. We have to start doing something about that. We must stand up and say that we are not afraid to criticise areas of the NHS, because I am sure that as we go through the debate we will have example after example from which we can draw only one conclusion: women are being failed.

My hon. Friend the Minister, as a practising nurse, will know the importance and vocation of patient care. With her professional eyes, will she allow the NHS to ignore the plight of people who are suffering every day? To be blunt, her predecessor appeared to. I ask her to apply her considerable and dedicated professional expertise to get the Government to direct the NHS to adopt the recommendations, or at least to mirror them. That is the least we can do for the terrible and horrific damage that the NHS has caused to so many people. To finish: the NHS did this, so the NHS must fix this.

2.5 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec

Shelbrooke) on securing this important debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for making it possible. As the right hon. Gentleman said, over six months ago we debated this same issue in the main Chamber. We pushed the Government for responses on the recommendations of the Cumberlege report. Many Members spoke passionately at that debate.

Today I want to talk about sodium valproate and the impact it has had. I looked up my speech from last July in *Hansard* earlier, and my speech today is almost the same. Forgive me if I am repeating from *Hansard*, but I think it is worth restating these points while giving an update.

Sodium valproate has had an impact on so many people, including children and women who took the drug during pregnancy. I want to talk about my constituent Bethany Dodgson, a young woman affected by foetal valproate syndrome. She speaks up on this issue and does a brilliant job of making people aware of it. She is also a carer for her brother, who is more seriously affected by difficulties caused by foetal valproate syndrome, and does a brilliant job of that.

I want again to pay tribute to Janet Williams and Emma Murphy from In-FACT—the Independent Fetal Anti-Convulsant Trust—who have done so much to campaign on this issue, and to all those other women and other people who have campaigned. As I said last year, it is really scandalous that we still have children being affected by foetal valproate syndrome today because their mothers were not aware of the risk of taking sodium valproate during pregnancy. Emma and Janet have campaigned, as have other people; they have been through the records and talked to people. I am sure many of us here have talked to Janet and Emma as they have gone about their work. They have ensured that women are made aware of the risks if they are pregnant or considering pregnancy.

It is now 18 months on from the Cumberlege report, “First Do No Harm”, and what we have seen is one letter sent some months ago to warn women of the risk. There are still issues to be tackled, and Janet, Emma and others continue to work with GPs and others to ensure that there is awareness of the issue. There have been attempts in previous years, with greater or lesser success, to ensure that doctors were aware and warned their patients, but much more needs to be done actively to ensure that no more children are harmed.

I would like to talk, as others have, about the recommendations of Baroness Cumberlege’s report “First Do No Harm”. First, the Government have accepted the call for a patient safety commissioner; I know that it is in the process of being advertised and that an appointment will be made. That is significant and very helpful. There is some movement, as there was at the debate in July, but we still do not have a patient safety commissioner in place. I hope that will happen quickly. I urge the Minister and the Government to continue to act and to press for swifter action to ensure that a commissioner is in place and is effective in pursuing patient safety issues.

As I said in July, there must be a redress agency. That is one of the recommendations of the report. I am disappointed, as I know lots of the women are, that the Government have now said, “There will be no redress.” I said last July that going to the law for compensation or redress is no answer for people who have suffered from any of the syndromes we are talking about. They have

[Liz Twist]

already suffered enough, and going to law is further pain and torture. It is a trial on top of what they have experienced—and, in some cases, continue to experience, as do their children, daily. I ask the Government to think again about that.

I endorse what Baroness Cumberlege said in her report: there must be an independent redress agency, so that people are spared the pain of having to keep fighting in law for their rights. I hope the Government will think again, as the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell said. I join him in calling for a redress scheme to be developed, even at this stage, to ensure that people do not continue to suffer and can cope with their conditions. These people have already had to live for years with the physical consequences for themselves or their family, without their views being heard. Please, Minister, think again, and take away from this debate the fact that there is cross-party support for a redress agency to compensate those people.

We heard about the patient reference group. When we spoke in June, it had been set up and was working. However, now that it has reported, there is no continuing involvement of patients in any successor group or body that would allow their voices to continue to be heard. I urge the Minister to look again at that, and to set up a patient reference group, or something with another name; the name does not matter. What matters is ensuring that the people going through this process are involved in what happens in the future. Please, Minister, look again at that. I am pleased that, since our last debate, the all-party parliamentary group first do no harm has been set up, and that Baroness Cumberlege continues to be involved and engaged on this issue, which is commendable. I know how hard she continues to work on this. However, that group was set up not by the Government, but by Members of this House and affected patients to ensure that their issues are not forgotten.

Finally, I will repeat what I said last year. Let us be clear: we are talking about a medical issue, but this is a women's issue. It is an issue of women not being listened to and their concerns not being heard, and of action not being taken. Frankly—I will say it again—it is just not good enough. We need to ensure that their voice is heard. As we develop and consult on the women's health strategy, which the Minister and I discussed in an Adjournment debate the other day, we need to make sure that we learn these lessons, and the lessons of so many other cases where the voices of women have not been heard and listened to effectively. The title of the Cumberlege report is, "First Do No Harm". It is vital that this principle is looked at when we consider the women's health strategy.

2.13 pm

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): As others have said, it is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) on having secured this important debate. We are here for a significant reason, which is, frankly, to hold the Government's feet to the fire and press them on why they have not made more progress on this issue. As others have said, it was debated some months ago in the Chamber of the House of Commons, and the

cross-party support for Government action was absolutely clear, as the presence here shows, yet we have had to come back to ask the Government why they are not making more progress.

The independent medicines and medical devices safety review was absolutely clear about the damage done by the three medical devices and medicines that it considered: Primodos, mesh—not only vaginal mesh—and sodium valproate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell—

Alec Shelbrooke: Right honourable.

Mrs May: I am so sorry; that must have changed after my time. My right hon. Friend set out very clearly how people's lives have changed. The hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) has just done that as well.

Lives have been not just changed, but significantly damaged. People have suffered physically, mentally, socially and, in many cases, economically. As well as suffering the direct impact of what was done to them and, in the case of Primodos, to the babies born with defects as a result of their mothers taking it, they suffered constant rejection by the state—by the NHS and the Government, the very bodies that should have been there to protect and support them. The longer it takes the Government to fully implement the recommendations of the Cumberlege report, the more rejection these people suffer. Every week that goes by is a further rejection, because the report was very clear: action needs to be taken.

I was pleased to set up the report, and I commissioned it largely out of the concern I had about Primodos, which had been raised with me by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), but also by our former colleague Seema Kennedy, who took up this issue as well. The aim of the review was not just to get to the truth, but to identify what needed to be done to redress the problems that had occurred, to provide support to those who had suffered, and to ensure that it could not happen again.

There are two glaring aspects to these issues. The first is that the natural reaction of the NHS and the medical establishment was—and, I fear, continues to be—to defend themselves, rather than to admit to mistakes, ensure that those who suffered were given the support they needed, and take action to ensure that those mistakes could not happen again. That is still happening.

I spoke to a constituent earlier this week who had an operation a number of years ago, and is still having operations to correct problems that arose from a mistake made in that operation. My constituent Hugh Whitfield, a former consultant surgeon who runs Independent Medical Negligence Resolution, spoke to me before Christmas about the large sum of money the NHS spends on litigation and on trying to defend cases in court, when a better system would be to just accept that mistakes were made. I have constituents who just wanted an apology. They just wanted to know that somebody had accepted that something had gone wrong, and to be shown that it would not be allowed to happen again. Instead, the NHS spends significant sums of money trying to defend itself in court cases when there is a better solution. That is slightly aside from the main point I want to make about the Cumberlege review, but it shows that the NHS's attitude is to defend itself, rather than accept that mistakes were made.

I want to pick up on a point made by the three Members who have spoken. Sadly, when we look at the three issues that the Cumberlege review considered, we see a patronising attitude towards women—a pat-you-on-the-head attitude. “There, there. This is the sort of thing you can expect. You’re in pain? Oh well. You’re a woman.” I am afraid that that was the attitude taken on some of these issues—and it was not just that: it was a female doctor, Isabel Gal—a woman who had survived Auschwitz—who first identified the problems with Primodos, but she was dismissed and ignored, and sadly her career was damaged as a result. She eventually left the medical profession. What comes through in the report is that there is an attitude of not being willing to listen to women’s voices, and of not accepting it when women say, “Actually, what you have done to me is causing me extreme pain and difficulty.” Instead of saying, “You know what? I do this, and I get it right. Go away, dear,” professionals should say, “Let’s look into this and find out exactly what happened, and whether we made a mistake.”

I come to three of the specific recommendations, one of which is to appoint a patient safety commissioner. Reference has already been made to this, and it is good that the Government have accepted the recommendation, although they needed a bit of a nudge in the House of Lords to do so. What concerns me is the need to ensure that this patient safety commissioner is not in hock to the Department of Health and Social Care.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell spoke about the NHS. Yes, these are the actions of the NHS, but behind it lies the Department of Health and Social Care, which consistently resisted properly looking into these issues over a significant period. I do not want a patient safety commissioner to be taken over by the Department of Health and Social Care. It has to be somebody who can be independent and can genuinely give patients a voice.

On the recommendation to establish a redress agency, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead is right that under its terms of reference, the Cumberlege review was not able to look at compensation for individuals, but it was asked to look at wider redress measures, and it proposed the redress agency—a proposal that, sadly, the Government have not been willing to accept. I know the Treasury will have heard the proposal as, “Ding, ding, ding! Pounds!”—I have dealt with the Treasury, and we all know what happens—but the agency would have a wider remit than that. The Treasury often thinks these things are just about funding and monetary compensation, but people who have suffered as a result of these issues need other sorts of support given to them—for example, support for children with special educational needs. Redress is wider than monetary compensation, which is often what Government think about.

Recommendation 9 is to set up a taskforce. The patient reference group is a good idea but, as the hon. Member for Blaydon said, where now? The taskforce would have the job of gripping this issue and pressing down on the accelerator for action. I ask the Minister: who in Government is gripping this issue and pressing the accelerator for action? As I am sure she will gather, most of us here think that nobody is doing that, and that the issue is being allowed to drift. It is important that these recommendations be followed up on.

My final thought is about levelling up—a term that some of us in politics like to use at the moment. The victims of these three issues need to have their lives levelled up with those of people who did not suffer as a result of this. Above all, NHS treatment given to women needs to be levelled up with that given to men, to ensure that women are not just patted on the head and told to go away.

2.23 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) on securing the debate. Without being facetious, I think it is the first time in my seven years in this place that I have agreed completely with his entire contribution.

The right hon. Gentleman focused on mesh. I will talk more about sodium valproate, but I agree with everything he said, and I have dealt with a constituent who came to me after her life was ruined by a mesh implant. She was suffering from pain and—others have mentioned this—economic hardship, as she had to reduce her hours at work, but she was lucky that she could still work three days a week. On top of all that, her personal independence payment for mobility was taken away, and I had to fight in Parliament to get it restored. That is a further way in which the state is letting down some of these people. They have already suffered from the operation; then they do not get the support they deserve, let alone the redress we are talking about.

I want to make the case for my constituents Mr and Mrs McKerrow and their daughter Claire. Mrs McKerrow was prescribed sodium valproate and Claire then suffered foetal anticonvulsant syndrome, which has affected her entire life. It has also affected her parents, and they have long campaigned for justice. They tried legal action, but were let down. They have been part of support groups. They engaged with and gave evidence to the Cumberlege review, so I can only imagine how hopeful they were when the thorough and comprehensive report from Baroness Cumberlege was printed.

Paragraph 1.38 states that

“valproate has caused physical and neurodevelopmental harm. We believe that the state and manufacturers have an ethical responsibility to provide ex gratia payments to those who have experienced avoidable damage from the interventions we have reviewed.”

The key sentence in paragraph 1.38 is:

“Patients have waited far too long for redress.”

I can only imagine how disappointed and angry people were when the UK Government ignored that in their response in July 2021. What a let-down! How can the Government ignore the key recommendation, which says that those affected by the interventions reviewed have waited too long for redress? As the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) said, every week is another week that those people are waiting and suffering.

As the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell said, the UK Government have accepted recommendation 1 and issued a full apology, but that apology is somewhat hollow unless they consider setting up a redress scheme for those who underwent these interventions. On one level, it feels like an apology from the Prime Minister—absolutely meaningless. We should not be surprised that

[Alan Brown]

the Government have so far also ignored recommendation 3—that a new redress agency should be created. The report states that such an agency should be

“based on models operating effectively in other countries. The Redress Agency will administer decisions using a non-adversarial process with determinations based on avoidable harm looking at systemic failings, rather than blaming individuals.”

That all sounds logical, and one would think that the Government wanted to address this issue, so hopefully the Minister will explain exactly why they have rejected the recommendation. Importantly, what other agencies in other countries have they reviewed? Baroness Cumberlege said that such agencies operate successfully elsewhere; what review did the Government carry out of those agencies before choosing to reject the recommendation?

Prior to the Cumberlege review, my constituents the McKerrows had made significant progress; they dealt directly with the BBC, professors of medicine, GPs and hospital consultants at each and every stage of Claire's life in order to demonstrate the link between taking sodium valproate while pregnant, the disabilities that their daughter has suffered, and the ongoing impact on her growth, development and ability to have a normal family life. As I said, they took part in a Cumberlege review meeting and gave evidence. Mr McKerrow explained to me that redress, which we know is morally due, as was stated in the review, would put him at ease by protecting his daughter and addressing her future needs.

The Cumberlege review rightly talks about the psychological damage done to those harmed by the various interventions, but there is guilt for the mothers who took a medicine—sodium valproate—that caused damage to their child. Of course, they are completely blameless, but that is not exactly how the mind always operates. That is another aspect of people's fighting to get justice, and to right the wrongs of being prescribed a harmful drug.

On redress, I recently submitted a written parliamentary question in the naive hope of getting a more positive response on compensation for the harm caused by sodium valproate. However, the Government's answer stated again that they

“did not accept the recommendation to establish separate redress schemes for the three interventions in the report, including sodium valproate. Our primary focus is on improving future medicines and medical devices safety and it is therefore crucial that we focus Government funds on initiatives that directly improve future safety (including specialist mesh centres and support for families affected by medicines in pregnancy).”

As the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell said, the mesh centres are not working anyway. In the final part of the answer to my written question, the Government said:

“For this reason, redress schemes will not be established in response to the recommendation in the report.”

Can the Minister honestly look these families in the eye and say, “Look, we've apologised. It's time to move on and look forward. We're not going to deal with you just now. We want to focus on future initiatives”? Can she not see how absurd that position is? Does she understand that all the people who gave their time to the Cumberlege review in the hope that justice would be served were effectively kicked in the teeth by the

Government's rejecting the recommendation for a redress scheme? Why undertake the review and not adhere to the key recommendations?

I am looking for an explanation from the Minister, but in an ideal world, we would see a U-turn. U-turns can be ridiculed in politics, but sometimes they are very welcome. This is certainly one U-turn that I, my constituents and everybody else who has suffered from such interventions would welcome.

2.30 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I pay tribute to everybody who has campaigned on this issue. I agree with every word of every previous speaker. I do not envy the Minister in having to reply to the debate, but I offer her an apology in that, because of an inescapable commitment that has been in my diary for many weeks, I will not be present for her reply. I gave my apologies to you, Mr Rosindell, in advance, and to our hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), who will be in the Chair later.

The issue was eloquently summed up by the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) when she said that she could have reread her speech of 8 July word for word and it would have been as relevant today as it was then. Interrogating my own website on my contributions on this subject in preparation for the debate, I see that, apart from speaking on that occasion, my first effort on this topic was way back in a debate on 19 April 2018. I have to ask the Minister why, when terrible health disasters happen, it always takes so long to do the right thing. All that does is prolong the agony for the victims. I suppose the people responsible for trying to make recompense feel that they will be out of the picture by the time their successors have to pick up the pieces, but it smacks of the contaminated blood scandal all over again. Everybody knew that it was a horrible disaster, yet it took so many years, indeed decades, before compensation was finally paid.

I want to give a voice to three of my constituents, who have summarised their experiences for me, and if time permits to refer to just a few of the dozen or so multifaceted written questions that I have tabled, with differing success in terms of replies, between July 2020 and November 2021. Let me first précis the summary that my constituent Amanda, or Mandy, has prepared for me. She had a procedure in 2009 for the insertion of TVT—transvaginal tape. She says that

“the surgeons need to take responsibility and ensure that these failings are not perpetuated. The pain and suffering we have endured and continue to endure is traumatic physically, emotionally, and financially”.

She says that she has subsequently had to undergo many surgical episodes that would have been unnecessary, and that

“had I been aware of the risks and the fact that alternatives were available I would not have had surgery in the first instance. Partial removal surgery made things significantly worse. To date I have had 8 operations relating to the TVT.”

Mandy lists some of the costs that it has meant for her:

- “Left in ongoing chronic pain
- Loss of some independence
- No intimacy possible

Relationship with husband negatively impacted which has an impact on work as we run a business together

Negative impact on my family and friends. I used to be happy and cheerful person, but this is now a constant struggle

Emotional stress of trying to appear 'normal' takes its toll

Feeling of being a failure as a woman and in my work life".

The list goes on. Then she comes to the topic of the failure of the surgeon. There are three entries here:

"Failure to discuss risks prior to surgery

Failure to suggest alternatives to TVT

Failure to obtain informed consent".

On the financial loss, I will not quote from her list, because others have set out the cost to them, but Members can be sure that it applies to Mandy as well.

My second constituent Helen, or Ellie, had two implants, in 2009 and 2011. This is what she has to say about the effects of these unnecessary procedures:

"Mesh has restricted my ability to work full time, due to constant pain, which has impacted negatively on my family...Mesh has cost me financially to travel for hospital appointments out of area. I've had to travel to London three times, staying in a hotel twice. Travelling to Bristol 9 times, staying in a hotel 7 times, as I am not able to sit to drive home on the same day due to pain. So not only fuel costs but hotel fees as well...Mesh has impacted negatively as I was told one operation would fix me, so one day's lost wages, which ultimately has resulted in 9 more operations, each requiring weeks off work, each resulting in loss of income and now ending with one more surgery which could also require more follow up surgeries."

She says that mesh, as in the case of Mandy,

"has cost me my sex life"

for

"which there is no financial recompense",

and adds:

"Mesh has cost me the ability to care adequately for my disabled husband, who now has to try to care for me...Mesh costs me monthly for my pain medication."

If time permits, I will refer to the brush-offs I have had when asking if Government would make it their policy to at least exempt these victims of NHS failure from prescription charges, with no success so far.

Helen goes on:

"Mesh costs me the price of a cleaner twice a week as I can no longer manage it all myself...Mesh costs me the pain of sitting in a car for over a two hundred mile round trip each time I go to see my consultant, as I can't see my local butcher."

That leads me on to something that has been hinted at before: it is all well and good to set up specialist mesh removal centres, but if the only choice people are given is to go to the surgeon who put the mesh in, who has now, after repeated failures, been appointed to take it out, would they seriously put themselves in his or her care again?

Finally, I want to talk about Emma, who is not only a victim of this herself, but someone for whom I am lost in admiration. She has acted, in a sense, as a focal point and a support for the other victims. Every so often she thanks me for what I have done to support them. I feel a complete fraud when she does that, because we should be thanking her for what she is doing as someone who is suffering from this and reaching out to support other victims. I know she is watching this debate on the feed today, and I express publicly my total admiration for her.

Emma says:

"Mesh has cost me my career. I am no longer able to fulfil the driving element of my job and have lost my Class 1 HGV licence as I cannot pass a medical...Mesh has cost me the ability to work

at a desk, in an office, therefore restricting my earning potential, and in turn my pension contributions. It also restricts my ability to find alternative work...Mesh has cost me thousands of pounds in travel, subsistence, accommodation and parking...loss of earnings & annual leave...days off for appointments, surgery, recovery, and mesh-related ill health."

That has all taken its toll. I could go on, but I will just pick one or two examples from the long list of the consequences of this disaster for Emma. She says:

"The battle to get any form of PIP was traumatic and stressful. The evidence was ignored, the condition insight report was not recognised (despite it being a DWP authored document)."

She goes on to say that PIP

"was only awarded (eventually) at an Independent Tribunal; which means I will have to reapply again, from the beginning, in just over 12 months' time...All told, the entire situation is extremely draining mentally, emotionally and physically."

Emma has also communicated with me while this debate has been under way, thanks to the wonders of modern technology, to point out that—as Southampton has been mentioned—there is, as yet, no named surgeon at University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust's so-called specialist centre.

I conclude by saying that I have been disappointed with the series of responses I have had to my dozen questions, which are all easily accessible for anyone who cares to look on the written questions section of my website. I was most disappointed by the response to question 31274, from 12 July 2021, which asked, in part, what steps the Secretary of State

"plans to take to research new and improved techniques for removal of eroded surgical mesh implants; and if he will make it his policy to establish a unit for developing such techniques in order to train a new generation of mesh-removal specialists to treat people who experience the effects of failed mesh implants in the future."

Bearing in mind what has been said about the intense difficulty of extracting degraded mesh from the flesh that has grown around it, I have often wondered whether there might be a technique to melt it away, rather than trying to extract it. However, if we do not do the research, we cannot possibly find a solution. The answer came, bluntly, from the then Minister of State, who is now the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport:

"There are no current studies specifically relating to new and improved techniques for the removal of eroded surgical mesh. However, there are five studies ongoing on surgical mesh implants and the National Institute for Health Research welcomes funding applications for research into any aspect of human health, including on the removal or implantation of vaginal mesh. There are currently no plans to establish a unit in order to train mesh removal specialists."

We know that only a tiny handful of people have successfully specialised in this field. They ought to be empowered to train up a new generation to help these people, whose suffering will otherwise continue indefinitely.

2.42 pm

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I add my thanks to the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) for securing this debate.

I would like to highlight the excellent work of the Epilepsy Society on sodium valproate. The Epilepsy Society is based at Chalfont St Peter, in my constituency, and its "Safe Mum, Safe Baby" campaign calls on the

[Sarah Green]

Government to fund research into safer epilepsy medication for pregnant women. It is a necessary and worthwhile campaign and I support it wholeheartedly. I hope the Government will give it due consideration.

I also pay tribute to my constituent Carol Nunn, who has given me permission to share her experience of surgical mesh. I understand from the Government's response to the Cumberlege report that their priority is to make medicines and devices safer and prevent future harm. While that is good to hear, I agree with the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell and others that maintaining this narrow focus entirely misses much of what is at the heart of the report, which is improving the lives of people who have already been harmed.

The Government have stated that supporting these women is one of their priorities. If that is the case, I do not understand why they repeatedly refuse to establish redress schemes. The Minister has claimed that there is no evidence that a redress scheme would improve the outcomes for these women. Respectfully, is the Minister really listening? Victims have lost jobs, endured relationship difficulties and financial stress and been left with chronic and often debilitating pain. They deserve redress.

I want to tell Members about Carol. When I first spoke to her last summer, she told me how, four years earlier, she had undergone a hysterectomy and rectopexy using surgical mesh. Instead of resolving her pelvic organ prolapse, the procedures left Carol with a serious autoimmune disease, struggling to walk and unable to continue with her normal daily life. She had to take long-term sick leave from her job as a medical doctor. She told me that she could not remember a day without pain.

I am pleased to say that today Carol is mesh-free following a successful removal surgery last year. She is the first person in England to have undergone successful rectal mesh removal. Although she is still suffering, Carol told me that she feels fortunate to have reached this outcome because, unlike many others, she was able to look outside the national health service and outside the United Kingdom. She feels fortunate because her professional training as a doctor gave her access to the knowledge and resources that allowed her to find Dr Veronikis—I apologise if I have pronounced that incorrectly—and fly out to the United States to have her mesh removed there. I am not convinced that anyone who has had to endure what Carol endured can be classified as fortunate, but I understand her point.

Having lost jobs and shouldered the financial burden of life-changing symptoms, others cannot afford to pay out thousands of pounds for private surgery or international travel to remedy harm that could and should have been avoided. That has now been acknowledged elsewhere in the UK. Last week, a Bill that will allow the Scottish Government to reimburse women who have had to pay for transvaginal mesh removal was passed in the Scottish Parliament. The Transvaginal Mesh Removal (Cost Reimbursement) (Scotland) Bill enjoyed cross-party support. I regret that it excludes the removal of mesh used in other parts of the body, but it is an excellent first step towards justice for mesh victims. I am pleased that patients north of the border now have access to support. I would like to be able to offer the same to my own constituents, which is why I urge the Government to look again at recommendations 3 and 4 of the Cumberlege report and to set up redress schemes.

I want to be clear: the mesh centres set up across the UK are, for many, inaccessible. For those, like Carol, who had rectopexy mesh, there is nowhere in the country offering removal without life-changing surgery involving the removal of organs. Carol, who is herself a doctor, described that type of surgery as barbaric. As has been mentioned, where removal is available the Government too often expect women to have the mesh removed by the same surgeon who inserted it. The choice facing victims is really no choice at all.

At the heart of the report is the recommendation that financial redress should be made available. In denying it, the Government completely miss the point of the report—the need to listen to victims. Baroness Cumberlege and her team met more than 700 affected individuals, mostly women, and found that they were not being listened to by medical professionals. Now they are not being listened to by their own Government. What is the point of commissioning a review if Ministers ignore one of its central findings? I hope the Minister and the Government will revisit the report's recommendations and look again at offering financial redress, because ultimately it is the right thing to do.

2.47 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell.

Groundhog day—here we go again. This is almost the identical debate that we had before. If this was in the main Chamber, especially if it was not on a Thursday afternoon, the Chamber would be full, because there is not one constituency that does not have somebody affected by the three conditions. As the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green) said just a moment ago, what is the point of commissioning a report or having an inquiry and then ignoring the key components of its conclusions?

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) on securing the debate. Sadly, I think we will end up having more. I am a loyal Member of Her Majesty's Government. I am absolutely aghast that we are here again discussing this. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), our former Prime Minister, for her support. The report would not be here today without her.

I congratulate Baroness Cumberlege, along with Marie Lyon, who ran the fantastic Primodos campaign. There was some worry about the experts that the baroness had around her, and we questioned her on those points to make sure that the inquiry was truly independent. At the start, the all-party parliamentary group was very sceptical because we had been let down by the expert working group. What an oxymoron that is! It is an insult to experts. Those on the group might be experts in their particular field, but they are not experts in people.

I want to talk in particular about Primodos. As several colleagues have said, very vulnerable women went to their GP for help, because they thought that they might be pregnant. They were myriad different ages, from myriad different parts of the country and certainly from different economic backgrounds. This touched everyone. They went to their GP and said, "I think I might be pregnant." That GP, in an NHS GP's surgery, pulled open a drawer, gave them some tablets and said, "This will tell you whether you are pregnant"—no advice, no concerns, no documentation.

These days, I have to take some medication and it is like “War and Peace” when I open the packet—even if I buy an aspirin. Although that is understandable, as aspirin can be very dangerous, so I will not use that example—perhaps ibuprofen or something. Clearly, that is because the industry, the pharmas, know that they have to cover themselves because they might be sued.

The side-effects for some of those ladies and their families and loved ones have been so traumatic. Some had miscarriages, some were told to abort the child and some went on to have children with abnormalities that were frightening then and today. The type of disabilities were similar to those of thalidomide, and one might have thought that we would have learned the lesson of thalidomide—tainted blood, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) alluded to earlier. But no—we have not learned those lessons.

Some people are alive today, but many have passed away. What is the Department waiting for? Is it, as with thalidomide, for these people to die early? That is why the fund for thalidomide ran out—the Department thought there was enough money in the fund, but people lived, because they have character and they survived, so we are about to top up the fund. These people, too, have lived, with unbelievable conditions. We, in Parliament and as a Government, surely should be here for them.

When the initial report of that expert working group was produced, many of us in the Chamber said that it was a complete whitewash. It was indeed a complete whitewash. The all-party parliamentary group on hormone pregnancy tests had some evidence sessions with members of the working group, and I asked, “Who gave you the authority to change the ministerial guidance on what your report should look like?” They said, “Oh, we just thought that we would change it.” It was all about the evidential base—it was easier for them to come to the conclusions that they wanted to come to.

We said it was a whitewash, and the Government did the right thing: they got Baroness Cumberlege to look at the three areas—I apologise to the other groups, because I completely agree with everything that was said, as I have constituents in the same situations that have been mentioned. But what is the point of saying to these people, “Here’s the report by the baroness, and the Government accept some of it”?

I had the honour of being the Policing Minister when my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead was the Home Secretary. The Hillsborough inquiry report was difficult. Governments of all colours had previously rowed away from the issue, because in general they were probably frightened about the conclusions—the conclusions were frightening. However, we did the right thing and we honoured the report. That is absolutely what should have happened with this report.

The Government, though, are turning around to say to these families that I am talking about today, and to the families involved with the other two conditions: “If you don’t like what we are saying, sue us.” I have been told that we have to be slightly careful not to go too much into the legal side of this, but those families have fought all their life to look after their loved ones and to say, “This is not on me.” We are rightly worried about the ladies who took the tablets, but men—the fathers of these children—have been told, “This was probably genetic. That happens.” That does happen, but this happened because NHS doctors gave these tablets to

patients in an NHS surgery and did not tell them the risks, even though they knew them. Back in 1967, Primodos was removed because of the risks, yet it was still available in 1978. I had been in the Army for four years in 1978; it was not that long ago. They knew the risks, but they continued.

People ask me why GPs were doing this. It was because drugs company salespeople were going into the GP surgeries and pushing their product at the doctors, promoting it so they could earn more and more money. We need pharmaceutical companies. Many of the medicines that we have today would not have been invented without pharmaceutical companies. However, when they get it wrong, we have to hold them to account. They got it wrong, and the Department of Health got it wrong, and thus Governments—it does not matter what colour they were; I do not care—got it wrong.

We touched earlier on why we are fighting this. I had the honour of serving in six or seven Departments—I lose track sometimes; it was three at one time, I think—and I was told lots of times by my officials that we needed to fight or challenge something. That happened lots of times at the Home Office; my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead is nodding away. I was the Disabilities Minister at the Department for Work and Pensions, and I asked why we were not settling with these people, because we had made a mistake. I was told that the Treasury counsel thought we might have a case, with about a 30% chance of success. Come on, guys.

At the end of the day, Governments are worried about saying, “Excuse me; we got it wrong and we are going to put it right.” The Government are going to put it right, we hope, but mistakes will still happen. That is the nature of medicine, I am afraid. But when we get it wrong, and doctors get it wrong, for once in their lives I wish they would just turn around and put their hands up. That is what I hear from my constituents in the complaints that come through my office; I am sure it is the same for all colleagues in this room. We see these reports and the amount of compensation that is to be paid, and they are challenged, and then eventually people get their money. There is something wrong.

I have sat in the Minister’s chair on more than one occasion and been bombarded, quite rightly at times. However, this is not about the Minister; it is about Government, and the structure of Government. Using the Minister as a conduit, this needs to go further, back up to the top and, at the end of the day, to the Treasury. The reason why people in government are so worried is because this could set a precedent. They are worried about whether it will cost the Treasury lots of money. Let us be honest: it will cost the Treasury lots of money, sometimes in ways that it is not even expecting. We have already talked about PIP and access to work. We could go on about the amount in benefits that this is costing Government anyhow. As well as that, the decent thing to do is to honour recommendation 4 of the Cumberlege report. It does not use the word “compensation” because Baroness Cumberlege was not allowed to use that; the terms of reference given to her were written to make sure that she could not. However, it says that this has been done to these people, we got it wrong, they trusted the Government and the Government have to compensate them.

I will say one final thing. The NHS is a wonderful organisation. Around the world, people look at our NHS and say, “We wish we had that. We wish we could

[Sir Mike Penning]

do that.” This is damaging the NHS. This, tainted blood and thalidomide—we could go on about other things—are a danger. We rightly addressed tainted blood and thalidomide, thank goodness; the campaigning by the thalidomide action groups was absolutely phenomenal. This needs to be resolved before it damages the NHS even more. Colleagues will retire or leave. Some people—particularly those affected by Primodos—will pass away. But we will not go away. We will go on and on and on about it in this House until compensation—recommendation 4—is provided to our constituents, and that is the right thing to do.

[SIR GRAHAM BRADY *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): May I take the opportunity to thank the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) for securing this very important debate?

The Cumberlege report makes nine strategic recommendations, and I will speak later on recommendation 3—to establish an independent redress agency. Other hon. Members have spoken eloquently this afternoon on the devastating effects of vaginal mesh implants and the drug sodium valproate, but on behalf of my constituent Nan McGradie and other individuals and families tragically affected, I will highlight specifically the dreadful harm caused by the drug Primodos.

In January 1975 my constituent, Nan, was prescribed two Primodos tablets as a pregnancy test by her doctor. It was subsequently confirmed that at that time she was about seven or eight weeks pregnant. There is considerable evidence indicating that those women who took the drug, prescribed by their GPs, and were pregnant at the time gave birth to babies with serious birth defects, including deformities and disabilities, missing limbs, cleft palates, brain damage, and damage to internal organs. In some cases the women miscarried or had stillbirths.

At the time, in 1975, Primodos had already been banned for use as a pregnancy test for five years in Norway and Sweden. When my constituent’s daughter, Michelle, was born in August 1975, it was immediately discovered that she had a hole in her diaphragm, which had allowed her bowel and spleen, part of her liver and kidney to be forced into her chest cavity, crushing her lung. Michelle was not expected to live, but thanks to the skills of our NHS she survived and is now 46 years of age. Throughout her life, Michelle has endured numerous operations and surgeries and long, long periods of hospitalisation, has suffered severe health issues, including breathing difficulties, a weakened immune system, numerous bowel obstructions and inflammatory bowel infections, and has been unable to conceive children. The effects of those debilitating physical and psychological medical and extremely challenging health conditions suffered by Michelle for the last 46 years just cannot be adequately described in words.

Let me return to the recommendations in the Cumberlege report and specifically recommendation 3, which states:

“A new independent Redress Agency for those harmed by medicines and medical devices should be created based on models operating effectively in other countries. The Redress Agency will

administer decisions using a non-adversarial process with determinations based on avoidable harm looking at systemic failings, rather than blaming individuals.”

The final Government response to it states:

“We do not accept this recommendation. We do not believe that a redress agency would make products safer and support our commitment to patient safety. We also believe it is already possible for government and others to provide redress where this is considered necessary, the government therefore has no plans to establish an independent redress agency.”

The decision by Government not to establish a new agency is callous and cruel and takes no account of the suffering or experience of the people who suffered as a result of a failure by successive Governments to protect them. It was the Government’s responsibility to protect people. The decision not to establish an agency has resulted in anger, frustration and great sadness for all, but especially those affected by the tragic consequences of vaginal mesh implants, sodium valproate and Primodos. Those feelings are perhaps best illustrated by direct quotes from those most affected by the Government failures. They include members of the patient reference group set up under the Cumberlege report. That was designed to be a forum for the Government to listen to the views of the people affected.

The people who took part in meetings of the patient reference group agreed that if the recommendation for an independent redress agency is not taken forward, those harmed by such medicines and medical devices, both in the future and in the past, will never get justice. They strongly rejected the notion that litigation was a viable substitute for a redress agency or an acknowledgment that patients have suffered harm. Many people just do not know where to seek redress for harm, and many cannot access legal services, primarily because of the cost. It should be noted that many of the victims of such circumstances were women born in the 1950s. They have already been punished financially by the Government’s robbing them of their pensions.

On 24 June 2021, a Minister attended a meeting to listen to those on the patient reference group sharing their experiences of the harm that they suffered. The group also shared the harrowing and distressing experience of their families, which elicited only platitudes from that Minister. The group were advised that litigation was the right way to obtain redress, even though that Minister was fully aware of the cost implications of funding legal action against the Government, whose regulators were responsible for the avoidable harm to those families. The immediate response from that Minister regarding litigation confirmed that she obviously had not listened, as there was neither empathy nor acknowledgment of the dreadful effects suffered by the families.

The patient reference group also felt strongly about the high emotional strain of the few successful cases, and expressed anger about the trauma that individuals and their families are forced to go through to obtain sufficient finances to survive, especially when their daily lives have already been made difficult through no fault of their own. Many expressed anger and insult about public money being repeatedly mentioned as a barrier to redress, and used the term “guilt trip” in response. Many members of the group also felt patronised. Group members clarified that an independent redress agency would provide a place for harmed individuals to recoup

the costs incurred by medical failings, and felt strongly that not having a redress agency is “a massive failing” by the Government.

The patient reference group was set up to gather and understand the views of the people most affected, but the Government have clearly not listened. Ministers advising litigation to obtain redress is a disgrace that shames this Government. They fail to accept, or even acknowledge, any moral responsibility for any failings. Immeasurable damage has been done to the individuals and families who have been failed by successive Governments’ lack of action and failure to prevent harm. The Government’s approach has been nothing less than reprehensible and a national disgrace. Setting up an independent redress agency is the right thing to do, and the Government should do it now, without any further delay.

Although the Cumberlege report is appropriately called “First Do No Harm”, the Government, medical bodies and pharmaceutical companies have not only done harm, but continue to do so by failing to address ongoing issues and the concerns of those affected. The Government now have the opportunity to right those tragic historic wrongs, and I urge them not only to implement the recommendation relating to an independent redress agency, but to implement in full and without further delay all the other outstanding recommendations in the Cumberlege report.

I pay tribute to Baroness Cumberlege and her team for producing the “First Do No Harm” report, and to Mrs Marie Lyon, the chair of the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests and vice-chair of the patient reference group, for campaigning tirelessly for over 40 years for justice for the Primodos children and families. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for her exceptional support for the campaign as chair of the APPG on hormone pregnancy tests, and to all others who have been involved in campaigning for justice, representation and support for those tragically affected by the consequences of vaginal mesh implants, sodium valproate and Primodos.

3.9 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): It is a huge pleasure to speak in this debate. I extend my congratulations to my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) on opening the debate in an incredibly sensitive and thoughtful way. I hope that I can follow his lead and not get angry at the Minister. I do not blame her for this, and I know that she has a very real and personal commitment to the women’s health strategy, which we will see come forward in the spring—I was grilling special advisers on that only this morning. However, I urge her to listen carefully to the voices she has heard today, and to recognise that Members of Parliament speak up on behalf of their own constituents. We hear in our surgeries, week in and week out, about the issues that are affecting women and impacting their wellbeing and health. I urge her to ensure that those voices are listened to ahead of the final strategy being published.

We have heard it all today: sodium valproate; Primodos; mesh. I always hear “the victims of mesh”, and I absolutely regard them as that; they are victims of a surgical process that has left them in absolute agony.

Each of us here this afternoon has a different perspective and interest. It is absolutely right that we all have highlighted the particular areas of concern to us.

Of course, I have victims of mesh living in my constituency. I also have a wonderful family whose daughter has been the victim of Primodos. Her story is one that always resonated with me, because she is exactly the same age as I am, and has been living with her disabilities since 1972. However, I really want to talk about sodium valproate. I do not know why that issue stuck with me so clearly, other than that two amazing women—Emma Murphy and Janet Williams—came to see me when I was a very newly elected MP and spoke to me about valproate. I am not an evangelist for banning the use of valproate—it is such an important drug, and has a valuable impact on those patients with epilepsy who need it to support them and manage their conditions well—but it is imperative to recognise that the dangers of valproate were known for many decades but not articulated to those women who were taking it and were of child-bearing age.

We have, for decades, had really effective pregnancy prevention programmes for various drugs. I always highlight—as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) pointed out, we have been here before—the use of Roaccutane, which I remember taking probably 30 years ago. I had to sign all sorts of bits of paper promising not to get pregnant. Then, when my daughter was prescribed it as an 11-year-old, she had to have a pregnancy test every single month—at 11—to demonstrate that she was not pregnant and that it was therefore safe to give her the drug. The same measures were not put in place for valproate.

Emma and Janet went digging around in archives; they have made endless freedom of information requests, and they have had their work recognised by the World Health Organisation. The pressure that they put on Members to convey the importance of a proper investigation to people like my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) brought forward the Cumberlege report, which was so valuable.

I will give a bit of a timeline: on 8 July 2020 that report was published; on 9 July, I was in the House for the oral statement on the Cumberlege report. I can remember my hon. Friend the Minister’s predecessor, the then Minister of State at the Department for Health and Social Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), actually giving us hope and confidence.

I listened to my right hon. Friend that day in the House and thought that she had the tone of her response absolutely right. She promised to take away the issues that we were all raising. She promised to look at all of the recommendations that the baroness had brought forward so competently and effectively. I had hope, as did the campaigning women from In-FACT, and the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who chairs the APPG. We all had hope that the recommendations would be accepted and acted on with speed.

Then, on 21 July 2021, a whole year later, rather than having an oral statement in the House, when we could ask the Minister what was going to happen, and what action was going to be taken on the recommendations, the Government snuck out a written ministerial statement on the last day before recess so we had no opportunity to bring forward the concerns that we had on so many

[Caroline Nokes]

of the recommendations either being rejected or only accepted in part. Those campaigners felt despair—not the hope that they had a year before, but despair.

The third date that I want to highlight—this is where I will provide some air cover to the Minister—is 15 September 2021. Rarely in a Member's career does the opportunity come along to ask question No. 1 at Prime Minister's questions, and on 15 September it was my turn. It will probably never happen to me again, so I carefully considered what issue to raise. We all have brilliant constituency issues that we want to raise or things that we have been campaigning on, and suddenly, in a Zoom call with Emma Murphy and Janet Williams, I went, "Do you know what? I have question No. 1 on Wednesday."

I used my question to ask the Prime Minister about the specific issue facing the parents of children impacted by foetal valproate syndrome: their children have learning difficulties and additional needs. Some are born with spina bifida, a cleft palate, heart defects or limb malformations. They have all sorts of additional challenges, which are expensive. They need redress and specialist centres where their children can get the support they need, to lead as full a life as possible. Guess what? Their parents also need respite. They need be confident that their children are being properly looked after, cared for, supported and helped to counteract all the challenges they face, and they need a break, but they have been offered none of those things.

So, in September 2021 I asked my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister if he would recognise that there was an additional cost—a fiscal impact—on these families and if would he commit to making redress available. He responded by indicating that the Government were "committed to making rapid progress"—

I emphasise the word rapid—

"in addressing all the areas that"

the Cumberlege report

"mentions, including the one that my right hon. Friend covered today."—[*Official Report*, 15 September 2021; Vol. 700, c. 964.]

Yet we are still waiting for redress and for the specialist centres, and the families are waiting for an acknowledgment that they face additional costs, day in, day out, and they want help with them.

I want to ask a specific question of the Minister, which was provoked in my mind by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who sadly cannot be with us for the conclusion of this debate. He made the point about disability and the women who have had mesh implants whose ability to work is impacted forever. I remember being a Minister at the Department for Work and Pensions. We did a lot of work around people who had long-term conditions and whether they should have to go through the reassessment process.

This would be an excellent opportunity for my hon. Friend the Minister to outline to us what work she is doing with the DWP to ensure that these women can be included in that group, so that they do not have to go through endless reassessments time and again to establish whether they are still suffering pain from mesh. That is an important point, because that would give them a

sense that we are making some sort of progress. That is my specific question for the Minister, which I hope she will be able to answer.

I will not take credit for my final, really important point, which should be given to my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell, who passed me a note mid-way through the debate. We have to make sure that this stops. We must not continue to ignore the voices of women who say they had a procedure that has damaged them, but who are told it is a mental problem and it is all in their head. We cannot have a situation where people continue to be ignored, or where drugs come on to the market and are left in use and circulation for decades, before somebody recognises that there is a problem. If we go back to thalidomide and valproate, it was decades before people recognised that there was an issue.

The point was made earlier that the aircraft and airlines industry has a no-blame, no-consequence reporting system for errors, so that if someone finds something that is wrong, it will not come back on them in their career. As my right hon. Friend the member for Maidenhead said, the career of the doctor who discovered the problem with Primodos was impacted by that discovery, for the rest of her career. We cannot have that situation. Just as the airline industry has a no-blame reporting system, can we also have that in our NHS, so that people have the confidence to report, knowing it will not come back upon them? Then we will not have medicines and devices that do harm, in the same way that we no longer have planes that simply drop out of the air.

3.19 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham, and to follow the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes). She summed up so well the concerns and the frustration that so many of us have. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke)—I call him that because we have worked so closely on so many of these issues. He spoke with such passion and in such detail about all these issues: about the impact on women and their families from mesh, from sodium valproate and from Primodos, which is what I will focus on while summing up the debate on behalf of the SNP.

My constituent Wilma Ord and her daughter Kirsteen were the very first constituents who came to see me after I was elected in 2015. I cannot believe that I am standing here today, alongside colleagues who were elected at various times, having challenged the Government and asked for action in 2015, in 2016, in 2017, and so on and so forth; for my part, I have been challenging them through three elections now.

As I said earlier, we have marched campaigners and victims to the top of the hill and put them through the trauma and frustration of the expert working group, which the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) so poignantly discussed. I remember going over the road to the conference centre with the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) to challenge the expert working group, which was essentially a whitewash and a big fat waste of public money.

We do not want the incredible work of Baroness Cumberlege to be another waste of public money, and it is clear that it is not. All her recommendations are so

important. An article in *The BMJ* in 2020 highlighted that the Cumberlege review exposed

“stubborn and dangerous flaws in healthcare”

and a healthcare system that is

“disjointed, siloed, unresponsive, and defensive.”

We must recognise the incredible work that the NHS does, but where there are flaws and where harm has been done, that must be fixed. Some things have struck me in particular about culture and harm, the litigious nature that I think has developed within some elements of the Government, and the unwillingness just to accept when wrong has been done and to see the human cost of it. The human cost to my constituent Wilma Ord and her daughter Kirsteen is just incredible, as it is to campaigners such as Marie Lyon, who has been campaigning for 40 years. She has spent four decades dedicating her life to the campaign, but she has not seen any progress other than these reviews and reports. Those are very important, but she has not seen justice and she has not seen change.

Members from across the House have mentioned the Government’s statement that there is no need for a redress agency because they have the levers and the tools. This is somewhat of a tangent, and we know that such cases are very rare, but a constituent came to me recently about the impact on them of one of the covid vaccinations. I commend the Government for putting in place redress for those who have been impacted, but I found out recently from answers to my written questions that that system has not yet paid out anything to anybody. That is proof that while there may be good ideas, they are not being followed through. A redress agency is crucial to ensuring that we make improvements and that our constituents’ lives are not damaged and dogged by such profound issues.

My constituent Wilma Ord’s medical records have a gap between 27 November 1968 and 27 January 1971, but we know that she was pregnant because she gave birth to a baby, Kirsteen, who was born with cerebral palsy and suffers from deafness. Wilma is not alone among women who were pregnant at the time in having suspiciously missing GP records. That is a mystery that many women have had to face, and I have seen written evidence to prove it. A document dated 13 March 1964 clearly states that GPs who were worried about adverse reactions would be best to destroy any evidence of records to protect themselves, and I quote, “however wrong” that may be. Schering, the drug company that is now Bayer, sought legal advice way back when it was told it would more than likely be found guilty of negligence by a trial judge.

Marie Lyon and others have had access to these documents, as has Baroness Cumberlege, who recommended that the families who suffered avoidable harm ought to be given redress because there is a strong ethical responsibility to do so. We have heard time and again from Members across the political spectrum how important that redress is. It is surely the first and last duty of a Government to look after their citizens and, where harm has been done, to find redress and do everything in their power to make sure that harm is not done in future.

My constituent Wilma Ord has often said to me that someone who did this or has the power to effect change should walk a day in her shoes, feeling and seeing what

it is like for her daughter to be unable to live a normal life. She has had a job but was bullied for being different, and no efforts were made to accommodate her deafness. I would like to think that the world and our society have moved on significantly, but Wilma feels very strongly and has expressed to me directly that it was her fault. It is important that we send a clear message today to all the victims of sodium valproate, mesh and Primodos that it was not their fault and that they are not responsible.

The right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) spoke about the culture that still exists within healthcare today. It discriminates against women and makes them feel as if they are imagining things. It is literally gaslighting them. The wait for redress has gone on far too long. Members have spoken so passionately today, but how often are we going to have to debate these issues over and over again before the Government simply accept the recommendations and put them in place?

Mention has been made of the legislation passed in Scotland. The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green) did not feel that it had gone quite far enough, but I hope that it has gone some way to redress. We have appointed a patient safety commissioner. We are also quite well on with our women’s health plan. I say this not to in any way bash the UK Government; we are doing very similar work. We might be a bit further ahead, but I hope that our Government and the UK Government can work together on this, because I think many learnings can be shared.

Members have said that it is not the Minister’s fault—that she is just doing her duty in delivering the lines of Government—but please listen to us. Please listen to our constituents’ concerns. Do not make them wait for more decades. Let us try to draw a line under a culture that puts the desires and views of lawyers before people’s lives. That is what we are talking about. My constituent and other victims of Primodos were used as human guinea pigs. That is not acceptable. We need to send them the strong message that we stand with them, but we need every Government across the UK to do everything they can to see redress and to see the Cumberlege report implemented in full, so that victims can be at peace and have the redress that they deserve.

3.29 pm

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) for securing this important debate and for his continued campaigning on women’s issues. We have heard today harrowing accounts of women’s experiences. It is really important that we hear those accounts and that they are repeated over and over again, because we need to remind ourselves that these are real human beings who have to live with this day in, day out. It is important that we record that in this House.

I thank right hon. and hon. Members for their powerful contributions to the debate. As a fairly new Member—I believe I am the newest Member in the Chamber—and having taken some time off for maternity, I have spent less time here than most Members present, so this is the first time that I am hearing about the progress that has been made on the Cumberlege review. It is really depressing to hear that we have not made much progress on the recommendations.

[Feryal Clark]

The pressing thread throughout the debate has been the patronising attitude to women's voices, as was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), which continues. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to campaigners for their tireless work around the Cumberlege review—particularly the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests, without which the review would have never taken place and we would not be here today.

We have heard that Baroness Cumberlege's excellent review looked into the use of Primodos, the use of sodium valproate during pregnancy, and the use of pelvic mesh implants. Those medicines and medical devices have caused untold physical, developmental and emotional harm to tens of thousands of women. It is almost four years since the independent medicines and medical devices safety review was announced, but it is over 50 years since these treatments started to be used and, as has just been mentioned, women have been trying to get their voices heard for decades.

Sir Mike Penning: The hon. Lady may be new to the House, but she is doing very well in trying to understand the position. In the case of Primodos, that was not a drug that was going to cure anything; it was simply a tablet that told the person who took it whether they were pregnant. There were other methodologies around at the time that were deemed to be safe, but GPs continued to give out Primodos when they knew it was not safe. It is quite a clear, difficult thing: GPs were giving out a drug years after the relevant bodies said it should not be given.

Feryal Clark: I totally agree with the right hon. Gentleman. I am the mother of an eight-month-old, and during my pregnancy I trusted my GPs and everything they said. I was vulnerable, like all mothers, and I believed that they wanted the best for me. It is absolutely devastating that GPs knew the impact of these drugs yet continued to give them out to women. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that contribution.

I have constituents in Enfield North who were impacted by these medicines. My constituent Chris was given Primodos in June 1970 to find out whether she was pregnant. Her daughter Emma is now 51 years old and has suffered throughout her life from limb deformation, spinal problems, scoliosis, joint problems and mental health problems. She lives in chronic and intense pain that does not go away, and she can no longer work full time.

The review set out nine ways in which the Government could have delivered justice, made the lives of those affected—such as Chris and Emma—a little easier, and tried to prevent future incidents. Given the shocking accounts that we have heard today—accounts that the Government have been hearing for years—and the evidence in the review, one would have expected the recommendations to be accepted in full, but that is not the case. As we have heard, the Government have accepted four recommendations, but there are two that they have not accepted. They have accepted two other recommendations in part, and one in principle.

I am pleased that there has been an apology and that there is legislation for a patient safety commissioner. I am pleased that there are specialist centres for the care

of those with complications from mesh implants, although I hope the Minister will address the serious concerns we have heard about that. I am also pleased about the changes to how doctors' conflicts of interest are reported.

However, that is not why we are here today. Implementing those recommendations alone is not good enough. The Government have refused to establish a redress agency for those harmed by such medicines and medical devices, or to set up a separate scheme to meet the costs of providing additional care and support to those who have experienced avoidable harm, which would make a huge difference to families in meeting their exceptionally challenging needs every day. My constituent Emma worries about her ability to keep working and her financial stability. If a scheme were available to support her financially, she would not have to worry.

The Government claim to care about women's health and making a change. Their vision for women's health, announced in December, is

“to improve the way in which the health and care system listens to women, and to reset our approach to women's health by placing women's voices at the centre of this work.”

They then directly cited Baroness Cumberlege's review, stating:

“Independent reports and inquiries—not least the report of the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review... have found that it is often women whom the healthcare system fails to keep safe and to whom the system fails to listen.”

The Government accept the review and use it, but will not deliver on it. They will not truly listen to those who have been campaigning for justice for years and do right by the families. They will not take the opportunity to reset their approach to women's health and place women's voices at the centre of their work by implementing all the recommendations.

In November, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to ask him to consider establishing a taskforce to implement all the recommendations of the review to put these injustices right. I am still waiting for a response. How can the Government claim that they are taking the review and women's health seriously if they cannot even respond to a letter from a Member?

Will the Minister please commit to implementing the remaining recommendations? If not, will she explain how not implementing the full recommendations of the Cumberlege review changes anything, or helps to create a system that keeps women safe and listens to them? It is time for her to stand up for the families affected by Primodos, sodium valproate and surgical mesh, and for the Government to stand by their vision by implementing the recommendations in full. Otherwise, we will fail these families and these women again and again.

3.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) on securing this important debate on Baroness Cumberlege's review. I was not present for the debate six months ago, so I cannot comment on many of the points that were raised then, but I am keen to update hon. and right hon. Members across the Chamber on the progress that has been made, because I am passionate about improving outcomes for the affected women. Not only do I have a huge amount of respect

for Baroness Cumberlege, with whom I am working extremely closely on the results of her report, but she is a constituent of mine. I assure hon. and right hon. Members that she is holding my feet to the fire on all her recommendations.

The findings of the review laid bare the consequences of a healthcare system that has failed to listen and has disregarded the experiences of women. We have heard that movingly in many of today's contributions, and in many debates in the House, on issues such as painful hysteroscopies, the delay in diagnosis for endometriosis or polycystic ovary syndrome, or women being ignored for years while experiencing symptoms of the menopause. There is a running theme.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) is exactly right that women often call for change on these issues for many years before their voices are heard. That is why I am pleased that we have England's first ever women's health strategy; we set out the vision document before Christmas and we will set out the full strategy very soon. It includes the appointment of a women's health ambassador, who will look specifically at the issues and priorities in the strategy. We are recruiting at the moment and should have someone in post very soon. That is to make sure that women's voices are not just heard but acted upon, so that in years to come we are not in a position where women and the MPs representing them are saying, "We have spoken every six months, but the situation hasn't changed." I reassure colleagues that I take all these points very seriously.

Alan Brown: It is good to hear the Minister's commitment to listening to women's voices. Will she listen to these women and, in particular, her constituent Baroness Cumberlege about the need to provide redress for the women who have been harmed by these drugs?

Maria Caulfield: I will come to that point. The Government have apologised on behalf of the health and care sector for the time it took to listen and respond. We are doing more than apologising: we are changing the healthcare system so that it responds to women in a much better way.

As the hon. Gentleman has just raised the issue of redress, I will touch on it now. It is not just these cases where it is often difficult for patients to get redress and compensation. I gave evidence to the Health and Social Care Committee this week on the issue of clinical negligence. This week, we announced a fixed recoverable costs scheme, meaning that, for low-value claims, we can speed up the claims process, reduce legal costs and ensure that, whatever clinical negligence they have experienced, patients are able to get compensation as quickly as possible. The findings of the Cumberlege report highlight mesh, Primodos and sodium valproate. However, across the board, it is very difficult for patients to get redress, regardless of the clinical negligence they have suffered.

Caroline Nokes: I do not want to be too difficult, but I do not think it is any excuse to say that because it is difficult for everyone to get compensation, we should not try here.

Maria Caulfield: I want to reassure my right hon. Friend that changes have already been made. When women were experiencing these problems, particularly with sodium valproate, compensation was mainly run by NHS trusts and individual organisations, which was very difficult and cumbersome.

We have introduced the duty of candour, which a number of Members have raised this afternoon. That duty means that when a mistake happens, hospital trusts and GPs have to be up front, own that mistake and explain it to patients. Very often, women did not realise that the problem was the sodium valproate or the Primodos; they thought something else had happened. The duty of candour means that hospital trusts and GPs are up front, that they apologise and that the process of redress is started as soon as possible.

Now that NHS Resolution has been set up, the process is as easy as possible for anyone with a claim of clinical negligence to come forward. As a result of the new system, between 70% and 80% of claims—I will correct the record if I am wrong—are now settled out of court, which is quicker and helps patients get the compensation they need. They have a fundamental right to that if clinical negligence has happened.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am listening closely to what my hon. Friend is saying. Is that data independently audited, and will it be made available? The reality on the ground is that although these things are in place, there are plenty of examples of people who feel that that is not the case, and that doctors and professionals are carrying on doing the same thing and not feeding back in. I welcome what she has said, but could an auditable trail be published to show what is happening and those who perhaps are not taking any notice?

Maria Caulfield: There are absolutely processes in place, including bodies such as the Care Quality Commission, which audit and inspect to ensure that the processes that have to be in place are being used. NHS Resolution is clear about the work it does, and its chief executive also gave evidence to the Select Committee this week on how the process should work. Of course, if patients feel that it is not working for them, we need to hear about it. We set up these mechanisms specifically to make compensation easy, quick and representative of the needs of those who are claiming, to make sure that they get the compensation they need as quickly as possible. That has not happened in the past; we fully acknowledge that.

The Secretary of State will announce a consultation on wider reforms to clinical negligence very soon, because we recognise that the system has not worked for people. It has been too bureaucratic, and the legal position and fear of going to court has put many people off. It does not need to be like that. We want to make it as easy as possible for people, whatever their clinical negligence claim.

Mrs May: I want to press the Minister. I apologise about that, but she will recognise from the debate that there is real concern about this. I have concerns about NHS Resolution and the way it operates. There are systems elsewhere, in countries such as Australia and Canada, where, at a very early stage, an independent medical expert, who is completely separate from the institution where the negligence has taken place, is brought in, and there is much more of a sense of

[Mrs May]

no-fault compensation and of not needing to go to litigation. NHS Resolution gets involved in litigation, and it can take many years before that is resolved.

Maria Caulfield: Yes, absolutely. Part of the consultation we will announce shortly will look at international comparisons. One concern we have about some of the no-fault schemes is the caps on the amount of compensation that can be given. I think some countries have a £1 million cap. I am not an expert on how much compensation these ladies should be due, but we want to make sure that, if we set up systems like that—we are not closed to those ideas—they actually address the issues that these specific women face. We will look at those options in the round.

Sir Mike Penning: May I press the Minister and draw her back to the Cumberlege report? What she is talking about going forward sounds really good, and the proof will be in the pudding, as my grandmother would have said. But recommendation 4 of Baroness Cumberlege's report for the Government talks about—this is my word—compensation. That is so important because, as we heard, some of these people have been caring for their loved ones for the last 50 years. They are not going to be here forever, and they feel enormously vulnerable that their loved ones, who they have looked after for all that time, will be left without their needs being met.

This is not all about the ladies who, for instance, took Primodos tablets. It is about the outcomes—in other words, their children, who are living with this today. We quite rightly concentrate when talking about sodium valproate, mesh and Primodos on what happened at the time, but the consequences of that are these people who are now in their mid-50s and 60s. What will happen to them? They will fall back on the state for PIP and other benefits when actually, recommendation 4 says in black and white that the Government should have sorted it out.

Maria Caulfield: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that point. Compensation can be claimed now. Our concern about setting up a specific body to oversee that is that that would not address the fundamental problem of why it is difficult to get compensation. However, it is a fundamental right of anyone who believes they suffered from clinical negligence to seek compensation, and we actively encourage that.

Liz Twist: This is really important. These people we have been talking about all afternoon are, as the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) said, living with the consequences of those actions. Baroness Cumberlege is absolutely clear about setting up a redress agency to

“administer decisions using a non-adversarial process with determinations based on avoidable harm looking at systemic failings, rather than blaming individuals.”

Recommendation 4 is that:

“Separate schemes should be set up for each intervention...to meet the cost of providing additional care and support to those who have experienced avoidable harm and are eligible to claim.”

Going to the law is not an answer for these people. It is difficult, it causes anxiety and it is expensive. We need real action now to address the problem.

Maria Caulfield: I take the hon. Lady's point, but the vast majority of claims that come through NHS Resolution are settled out of court. We want to make sure that patients get the redress that they are entitled to. There are mechanisms other than going to court in place right now.

Sarah Green: My constituent has approached several legal firms who will not take on her case because the two surgeons who operated on her also work for the law firms advising them on whether such cases will be successful, so that option is not open to her.

Maria Caulfield: If the hon. Lady writes to me about that specific case, I am happy to look at it.

The Government published their response to the review in July last year and accepted the majority of the recommendations for improvement. I want to update Members on those because we are absolutely committed to making rapid progress in all the areas in our response. We have committed to publishing an update on the progress of all the recommendations that we accepted, and we aim to publish that in the summer. If colleagues want to hold my feet to the fire, they will certainly get a formal update in the summer.

We have made strong progress on some of the changes.

Sir Mike Penning: It is fortunate that we have so much time because we can ask lots of questions. Marie Lyon, the Primodos campaigner, has effectively been told by the Minister's predecessor, “See you in court”. I do not know about the experiences of the other conditions, but the Primodos campaigners do not have money. They have the will, but they are completely exhausted. They pinned all their hopes on the Government accepting the report's recommendations. These people will not get a no win, no fee arrangement or a pro bono. They will have to try to fundraise, and they will, but is that morally right when the baroness's report and its recommendations, published by the Government, say that they should not have to go through that?

Maria Caulfield: Specifically on Primodos, there is pending litigation so it is difficult for me to comment while that is in progress, but, depending on the outcome, the Government will respond to that.

Caroline Nokes: I will go for valproate, because there is not pending legislation about that. Have I understood the Minister correctly? Is she saying that if the Primodos case is successful, the Government will review it, and the women who have had mesh implants or who are the victims of sodium valproate will not be expected to have to go down that legal route?

Maria Caulfield: If I touch on the points in my response, hopefully I will be able to reassure colleagues on the progress being made.

Alan Brown: The point is that Baroness Cumberlege says the Government have an ethical duty to consider redress, so what does the Minister say to her constituents about that ethical duty that should be placed on the Government?

Maria Caulfield: I have addressed the points about redress, which is available. We are reforming the process of clinical negligence to make it easier for patients to get

compensation without the need to go to court, and we are having some success in that. There is a very different system in place now compared with when many of these ladies were affected.

The patient safety commissioner was mentioned by some colleagues. The consultation proposed details for setting up the commissioner's role. Baroness Cumberlege is on the recruitment panel for that position and will keep a close eye on the role of the commissioner. The advert and recruitment process is now up and running, and we expect to appoint someone very soon. I reassure colleagues that that appointment will be in place: the recruitment process has started, Baroness Cumberlege is on the panel to appoint the commissioner, and that commissioner will be independent—a point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead—of the Department of Health and Social Care, which will of course work closely with them. The commissioner will be able to scrutinise both the NHS and the Department itself.

On recommendation 5, about specialist mesh services, eight specialist centres are now operating in England, where women who have been affected by mesh implants can access treatment and mesh removal. A ninth is being set up in Bristol at the moment. I remain very open to colleagues' experience of those mesh services. Women have the option to choose which centre they go to, but I recognise that that might involve great distances from where they live.

If women are not being referred to the centres, however, or if their experience of the centres is that their needs are not being met, I am keen to hear about that, because the whole point of setting the centres up was to ensure help for those women who have experienced mesh implants that have caused huge trauma—I take on board everyone's points—to them, changing their lives and those of their families forever. If that is not working, the women's health ambassador, the patient safety commissioner and I will look at that, because that was the whole point of setting up such services.

Liz Twist: Will the Minister say something about the specialist centres proposed for valproate and Primodos? They do not exist; I believe that the Government rejected them.

Maria Caulfield: Valproate should not be being used on women or girls able to have children, unless they have a pregnancy prevention programme in place. That is to ensure that patients are fully aware, if they need to take sodium valproate, of the effect on any potential pregnancy. The NHS also commissioned the paediatric neurosciences clinical reference group to support the development of pathways for care services, specifically to improve patient support and co-ordination on the pathway for sodium valproate.

Mechanisms are therefore being set up for those women and girls who need to take sodium valproate. I think my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) pointed out that, in other settings, a huge amount of work is done to ensure that those women do not get pregnant. Also, a multidisciplinary expert group with experience in responding to exposure has been established. It will report its recommendations to NHS England in March this year. We will follow up on those recommendations, but a

piece of work is being done specifically on sodium valproate, which will help to prevent such problems in the future.

Recommendation 6 was on MHRA reform. The review highlighted the need for the regulatory agency to undergo substantial revision, in particular on adverse event reporting and patient engagement. As many Members said, instances were flagged many times by many different people—the women themselves, MPs in this place, charities and other bodies—but people did not listen, although the MHRA has a duty to do so.

The MHRA has now initiated a substantial programme of work to improve how it listens and responds to patients and the public, developing a much more responsive system for adverse event reporting and supporting timely and robust decisions involving patient safety. It has been consulting on a new regime for medical devices that makes patient safety, engagement and transparency more prominent.

To strengthen its commitment to patient engagement, the MHRA recently established an enhanced customer service centre to make it easier for patients to express concerns, whether about medicines or devices that are being used. The MHRA has also appointed a chief safety officer, Dr Alison Cave, who will lead its ongoing commitment to the recommendations.

On setting up a database to collect details of all implantations of devices, which is recommendation 7, we have already legislated for that through the Medicines and Medical Devices Act 2021. The Act created a power for the Secretary of State to regulate for the establishment of a UK-wide medical device information system. Alongside developing those regulations, more than £11 million has been set aside for the work, involving partners across the healthcare system to scope, test and cost options for that workstream.

On transparency for payments, which I think was raised by the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green), who spoke about the conflicts of interest between doctors and pharmaceutical companies or providers of surgical mesh, recommendation 8a highlights the need for greater transparency for payments made to doctors. The recommendation calls for a register of doctors' interests and for recognised and accredited specialisms to be held by the General Medical Council.

As the Government set out in our response to the review, we agree that lists of doctors' interests should be publicly available. We continue to hold the view that that information will be most accessible to patients if it is published by healthcare providers rather than by the GMC. We are taking that measure forward and it should be in place by July this year.

We are also working with professional healthcare regulators to be clear that all regulated health professionals—not just doctors—must declare their interests, and that that information must be published by their employers. That approach will give not just women but all patients the reassurance that there are no interests involved in clinical decisions made about their care. We are working with the Care Quality Commission and equivalent organisations, and with the devolved Administrations, to ensure that implementation is monitored and that there is local accountability.

Recommendation 8b touches on the mandatory reporting of the industry. It calls for the pharmaceutical and medical devices industries to establish payments made

[Maria Caulfield]

to teaching hospitals, research institutions and individual clinicians. On 24 January this year—just a few days ago—an amendment to the Health and Care Bill was tabled to give the Government the power to deliver on that important recommendation. That legislation will, I hope, come into law fairly soon. The amendment will enable the Secretary of State to make regulations requiring companies to report information about their payments to the healthcare sector. That measure will benefit patients, who will see payments made to their doctors or hospitals, and it will build on proactive initiatives by healthcare regulators and the industry.

I very much take on board Members' feeling that it took too long to acknowledge the problems that those women have faced, whether because of mesh implants, sodium valproate or Primodos. Although this may not be of any reassurance for women who have already been affected, we now have measures in place to flag problems in the system. For maternity care and clinical negligence, for example, we have an early notification system so patterns of events around neonatal care and foetal abnormalities are picked up at an earlier stage, to get on top of the causes quickly. We are seeing improvements in maternal and neonatal outcomes as a result of that early warning notification system.

We very much recognise that such problems did happen in the past, but measures are being put in place to make sure that they do not happen in the future. I certainly want to make sure that the women affected are getting the care and support that they need. I very much take on board the points raised by hon. Members. I am very happy to keep Members updated on progress. I meet Baroness Cumberlege regularly to address the issues raised in her report.

I reassure colleagues that many of these issues will feature in the women's health strategy, which we will publish shortly. The women's health ambassador, the patient safety commissioner and I will be working hand in glove to make sure that women's voices are heard in relation to their healthcare, and that we end the pattern of women feeling that they are not being listened to, that they are palmed off, and that their concerns are not taken seriously.

Hannah Bardell: Does the Minister recognise that this is not only about compensation, but about exposing the failures so that they never happen again? Eighteen members of the Primodos support group have died in the past two years. That gives an idea of just how long people have waited. They should not have to wait any longer. Those who have died will never see justice.

Maria Caulfield: I absolutely take that point—that is the crux of the matter. For too long in the health service, there was no duty of candour. The health service did not acknowledge when mistakes were made. That is changing; there is now a duty to declare when a mistake has happened. There is also support for staff. I cannot remember who mentioned the whistleblower on Primodos, but there is protection for whistleblowers now. There are freedom to speak up guardians to support whistleblowers in the workplace, and the Care Quality Commission is happy to take notification from patients and staff if there are worries about unsafe patient care.

That will trigger an unannounced inspection to look at the data. It is all about creating a culture of learning in the NHS, rather than one of blame that pits patients against clinicians—that is what we want to change. That is how we learn from the mistakes of the past and prevent mistakes in the future.

Alan Brown: I thank the Minister for taking one more intervention. She talks about blame and not pitting patients against doctors or the NHS. Is that not the whole point of the redress agency that was recommended, to take away that adversarial approach?

Maria Caulfield: That is why we introduced NHS Resolution to facilitate a quicker method of getting compensation to those who have been harmed through clinical negligence. I encourage hon. Members to look at the work of NHS Resolution. We are doing more to ensure a better experience for patients, but we are fundamentally committed to ensuring that those who have been harmed get the support they need.

Sir Mike Penning: The Primodos victims—I am not allowed to talk about the court case—have had no choice. They are in court now because the Government would not take on Cumberlege recommendation 4. It is all well and good talking about what will happen in the future, but they are living with this now. They are in court today. Surely the Government should settle with them now. Like the Minister has said several times, these things get settled out of court. Well, settle with Primodos victims now and they will not have to go through that.

Maria Caulfield: I cannot speak on active litigation claims, but between 70% and 80% of claims are settled out of court because that is the avenue we want to go down. It is not in anyone's interest to go to court. I am happy to keep hon. Members updated. There will be a formal review in the summer, but I am happy to have my feet held to the fire to ensure we deliver on the Cumberlege review for those patients who have suffered.

4.7 pm

Alec Shelbrooke: I thank all hon. Members who have contributed this afternoon. Even though many Members have given me apologies for not being able to be present, we have covered the wide-ranging aspects of the review concerning Primodos, sodium valproate and mesh. I thank and congratulate the Minister, who showed in her response that she understands her brief. I will come on to some of the issues we disagree on, but she did not just read out what had been written for her. She has taken the issue seriously and has taken the debate on board. That is a refreshing change from her predecessor.

Let me move on to some of the specific comments. I welcome the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green), with whom I have not had the privilege of being in a debate before. She made an important point when she said that we need to listen to victims. That is the point of the report: the need to listen to victims. We have to be very careful about how we proceed. The report was trusted because the victims felt that they were finally and properly listened to. That is why it matters so much.

Let us be blunt: it does not matter which side we are on, we in this place are all getting a bit of a bad press at the moment. The report is an opportunity to show people that they can have faith in this place and trust it. When we go out, listen to victims, take their views on board and, as a Parliament, say, “The adversarial side of politics can be parked over there, because on these really important issues, we all get together and we can make things happen,” we can do things. I thank the Minister for the progress that she is making on the recommendations, and for giving us the update.

The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) gave us a shocking revelation. Records were destroyed, rather than people admitting the mistakes that had been made. That is why redress, the databases and all the other things that we want to introduce are so important.

We come back to this point. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) for her reference to the analogy I gave her about the aircraft industry. The Minister used the word “whistleblower”, and that is the wrong word. We are talking about cultural change, and it follows on from what the hon. Member for Livingston and my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North said. We have to develop a culture in which it is natural for anybody working in a system to feed in, “This is going wrong” or “There has been some evidence of this.” There should be no blame for anybody and no comeback for their careers.

I am a great fan of the TV programme “Air Crash Investigation”—my wife cannot watch it—especially as I spend my life in the air. It is absolutely clear when people watch that programme how the airline industry

is now at a point at which it is really unusual for a plane to drop out of the air, because of the no-blame culture. If somebody leaves a spanner somewhere, that gets reported. The tiniest things are reported, which is how that industry’s safety has improved.

Mrs May: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair): Order. I am terribly sorry to interrupt the right hon. Lady, but we cannot have interventions during what should be a very brief winding-up speech.

Alec Shelbrooke: Thank you, Sir Graham. The most important point that I want the Minister to take away today is the following. I do not want compensation for people; it is not compensation that I am seeking. I want there to be grants, like the thalidomide grant. People will be subject to these injuries for life, and compensation is not going to cover it. We have a responsibility to deal with the problem, so I hope that my hon. Friend takes that away today. I say this to the Minister: we will keep coming back and keep coming back, and eventually there will be a votable motion on the subject on the Floor of the House and I do not think it will be able to be whipped.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of implementation of the recommendations of the Cumberlege Report.

4.11 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 3 February 2022

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Ebbsfleet Garden City: Update

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): I am today laying a departmental minute to advise that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has received approval from Her Majesty's Treasury for a remote contingent liability for the Department arising from Ebbsfleet Development Corporation's investment in the Ebbsfleet central site.

As part of the 2014 Budget, the Government announced plans to create a new garden city—the first in over a century—at Ebbsfleet, north Kent. The Government also established the Ebbsfleet Development Corporation, a statutory body that reports to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, to bring forward the development of the garden city.

The Ebbsfleet garden city will help provide new homes and support wider economic growth across the Thames estuary.

The departmental minute describes the remote contingent liability DLUHC will incur in relation to EDC entering into an indemnity with HS1 Ltd. The remote contingent liability will remain for the short time that the works will be ongoing and will cease to exist once the occupiers of the land have signed off the works.

The Department will fund any expenditure should any claims be brought forward against EDC, through the normal supply procedure.

[HCWS581]

Elections

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): The Elections Bill brings forward changes to our electoral system which are vital to ensure our democracy remains secure, fair, modern and transparent, and I am pleased to update Parliament today with further information on the implementation of two key changes, the extension of the franchise for British citizens living overseas, and the introduction of an online application service and identity verification for absent votes. In addition, today the Government are providing their response to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee's report on the Elections Bill to the Committee.

Overseas electors policy statement

The Government's 2019 manifesto included a commitment to "make it easier for British expats to vote in [UK] parliamentary elections, and get rid of the arbitrary 15-year limit on their voting rights".

Through the Elections Bill, the Government are extending the franchise for UK parliamentary elections to all British citizens living overseas who have been previously registered to vote or previously resident in the UK. In addition to extending the franchise, the changes will facilitate participation by making it easier for overseas electors to remain on the register with an absent vote arrangement in place ahead of elections.

The Bill, and the secondary legislation which will flow from it, will also deliver improvements and consequential amendments to the registration process for overseas electors, including the processes by which applicants have their identity and connection to their relevant previous UK address verified.

To provide further information on these proposals, I am today publishing a policy statement setting out the key changes in the Elections Bill, as well as the Government's intention for associated secondary legislation, which will set out further requirements regarding how those changes will work in practice.

The approach we are proposing to take is subject to ongoing engagement with stakeholders and, ultimately, will be subject to parliamentary scrutiny.

Identity verification for absent vote applications and an online application service policy statement

As set out in my statement to the House on 6 January (HCWS525), a measure to introduce an identity verification for absent vote applications and an online application service was introduced to the Bill via Government amendment at Report stage of the House of Commons. I am therefore pleased to be also publishing a policy statement on these measures to outline further information on the Government's plans for how the policy will operate in practice.

Digitising the absent vote application process will also benefit overseas electors who typically vote by post or proxy, and will complement the Bill measures that remove the current 15 year limit on the voting rights of overseas electors.

It is our expectation that all the measures in the Elections Bill will be in place within the lifetime of this Parliament and implementation will be staged over a sensible and pragmatic timetable; it is imperative that this is done properly and with sufficient time for the elections sector and for voters to prepare for the new requirements. It is our ambition for rollout of the changes for overseas electors and the new online application service for absent votes to take place in parallel, alongside changes to the arrangements for renewals of absent vote applications, thereby improving efficiency of the system for both electors and administrators.

PACAC response

On Monday 13 December, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) released a report on the Elections Bill. Today the Government are providing its response to the report.

The associated policy statements have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS584]

CABINET OFFICE

Commission for Racial Equality Pension and Life Assurance Scheme

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Steve Barclay): It is normal practice, when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Minister concerned to present a departmental minute to Parliament giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances.

I wish to notify Parliament of a contingent liability that the Government have entered into in the form of an indemnity connected to the winding-up of a pension scheme managed by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, an arm's length body which is sponsored by the Cabinet Office.

The EHRC is the successor body to several anti-discrimination bodies that were dissolved by the Equality Act 2006. One such body was the Commission for Racial Equality, which set up a pension and life assurance scheme—CREPLAS—in 1974.

The winding-up process is now nearly complete. The scheme has surplus assets of c. £7.4 million, and when winding-up is fully completed the trustees will refund the surplus, net of tax, to the Treasury via the EHRC.

The Treasury granted the CREPLAS trustees two lines of protection in the form of (a) post-wind-up indemnity against future claims and (b) the power to purchase private insurance. The Treasury is satisfied that its handling of this unusual case should not set a precedent for other existing or future cases both within Government or for other public sector bodies.

The residual risk borne by EHRC/Treasury under the proposed indemnity has been estimated at under £3 million, and is acceptable to the Treasury. In relation to this, I have today laid before Parliament a departmental minute giving notice of the Department incurring this contingent liability.

The contingent liability will in due course be included in departmental and ALB annual reports and accounts. [HCWS580]

EDUCATION

Capital Spending

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker): Today, my noble Friend The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the School System (Baroness Barran) made the following statement:

Today, we have published the Government's response to the consultation on prioritising remaining places in the school rebuilding programme. We have also published guidance on how schools can be nominated for the next prioritisation round, which also opened today.

The school rebuilding programme was announced by the Prime Minister in June 2020. We have already announced the first 100 schools to benefit from the programme as part of a commitment to rebuild or refurbish the poorest condition buildings at 500 schools over the next decade. Replacing poor condition buildings with modern designs that will be net zero carbon in operation will transform education for hundreds of thousands of pupils.

The first projects in the programme are now under construction, and the finished buildings will bring pride to the students, staff and communities who use them. The programme also represents a close partnership with the construction sector, enabling us to invest in skills, drive growth and build back better as we recover from the covid-19 pandemic.

We will continue to make the best use of remaining places in the programme by prioritising schools with buildings in the poorest condition, or with significant issues that could pose a risk of closure.

In its consultation, the Department proposed an approach to assessing nominated schools using consistent, national data on school condition. Bodies responsible for school buildings would also be able to submit additional professional evidence of severe need, such as structural issues. The majority of consultation respondents agreed with these proposals.

The approach we are putting in place for selecting schools will, for the first time in this programme, allow academy trusts, local authorities and other bodies responsible for school buildings to put forward schools for consideration in a straightforward way that minimises burdens on the school sector. This approach also harnesses local insight into the schools with greatest need and maximises value to the taxpayer.

In addition to our building programmes, we also support the school sector with annual capital funding. We have allocated £11.3 billion to improve the condition of the school estate since 2015, including £1.8 billion in financial year 2021-22. Allocations for 2022-23 will be set out in due course.

Further details, including guidance on how schools can be nominated in the upcoming prioritisation round, have been published on gov.uk. Copies of the consultation response and Equalities Impact Assessment will be placed in the House Library.

[HCWS583]

International Teacher Training Qualification

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker): The Department for Education has today confirmed who will pilot a new international teaching qualification called iQTS. The new qualification will support those who already deliver excellent teacher training in England to meet global demand for high quality professional development and provide more opportunities for teachers around the world to train to high standards. Six providers have been approved to deliver the pilot from September 2022. The selected pilot providers are available at: [Introducing the international qualified teacher status \(iQTS\) pilot - gov.uk \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/introducing-the-international-qualified-teacher-status-iqts-pilot)

In February 2021, the Department for Education and Department for International Trade published an updated International Education Strategy, where it was announced that the Government would consult on plans for a new international teaching qualification.

The consultation set out the proposed framework for iQTS, built around methods and standards of English initial teacher training, with contextualisation to reflect the local setting in which the qualification would be delivered.

The proposals for iQTS received significant support and in August 2021 the Government response was published, announcing the intention to launch iQTS with a pilot in 2022. The response is available at: [Introducing international qualified teacher status \(iQTS\) - gov.uk \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/introducing-the-international-qualified-teacher-status-iqts)

In November 2021, the Department for Education published guidance on iQTS, available at: [Introducing the international qualified teacher status \(iQTS\) pilot - gov.uk \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/introducing-the-international-qualified-teacher-status-iqts). This set out further detail around the iQTS framework, criteria and pilot for institutions and trainees. Pilot providers will use this guidance to deliver robust iQTS programmes from September 2022. The guidance on gov.uk confirmed:

iQTS will be recognised by the Department for Education as equivalent to English qualified teacher status (QTS), subject to the will of the Parliament, and delivered in English.

Only accredited English ITT providers will be able to offer iQTS. All of the English Teachers' Standards will be included for iQTS, with guidance for how to apply them in different international contexts.

The core content framework will be used in its entirety, with guidance for international application.

The entry criteria will remain aligned with domestic requirements for ITT courses.

Six pilot providers have been approved to deliver the iQTS pilot from September 2022. This follows the completion of an exercise where accredited English initial teacher training providers were invited to apply to join a year-long pilot to test and improve the design and delivery of the iQTS qualification.

[HCWS582]

Levelling Up Missions: Education and Skills

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker):

I have announced a number of new education and skills reforms which support delivery of two of the Government's 12 levelling up missions which can be found in full on gov.uk.

The missions that the Department for Education will lead are:

Education: By 2030, the number of primary school children achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and maths will have significantly increased. In England, this will mean 90% of children will achieve the expected standard, and the percentage of children meeting the expected standard in the worst performing areas will have increased by over a third.

Skills: By 2030, the number of people successfully completing high quality skills training will have significantly increased in every area of the UK. In England, this will lead to 200,000 more people successfully completing high quality skills training annually, driven by 80,000 more people completing courses in the lowest skilled areas.

Plans to deliver our ambitious education mission will be underpinned by proposals for 55 new education investment areas that will target investment, support and action that help children from all backgrounds and areas to succeed at the very highest levels. Education investment areas will cover the third of local authorities in England where educational attainment is currently weakest, plus any additional local authorities that contain either an existing opportunity area or were previously identified as having the highest potential for rapid improvement. A list of all 55 education investment areas can be found on gov.uk.

We will also open new free schools where they are most needed and prioritise education investment areas in doing so. This will include new specialist sixth-form free schools, helping ensure talented children from disadvantaged backgrounds have access to the highest standard of education this country offers.

The UK Government will create a transformative new online UK National Academy. It will support pupils from all backgrounds and areas to succeed at the very highest levels. This support will be made available across the UK.

I am announcing a joint project to be launched between DfE and the Food Standards Agency to design and test a new approach for local authorities in assuring and supporting compliance with school food standards. The UK Government will promote accountability and transparency of school food arrangements by encouraging schools to complete a statement on their school websites, which sets out their whole school approach to food.

In addition, the UK Government will invest up to £5 million to launch a school cooking revolution, including the development of brand new content for the curriculum and providing bursaries for teacher training and leadership and training for governors and trusts.

To make our skills mission a reality, thousands more adults will soon be able access free, flexible training and get the skills they need to secure careers in sectors including green, digital and construction as part of up to an additional £550 million boost to expand the popular across the country.

To better understand the skills gaps, I am establishing a new future skills unit which will look at the data and evidence of where skills gaps exist and in what industries. Furthermore, we are working with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education to roll out higher technical qualifications from September 2022, which have been approved against employer-led standards as providing learners with the knowledge, skills and behaviours required for a given occupation.

Employers must be at the heart of reforming local skills infrastructure. To realise this, the 2021-22 skills accelerator is piloting new employer-led local skills improvement plans and supporting providers with strategic development funding to help shape technical skills provision to better meet labour market needs.

So that in future we can achieve greater alignment to the delivery of employment and skills interventions, in Blackpool, Walsall and Barking and Dagenham the Government are trialling new pilot pathfinder areas to bring together local delivery partners from the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education, to support people into work and better identify progression opportunities for those in part time employment.

Alongside launching a further nine institutes of technology, taking the total in England to 21 and exceeding our manifesto commitment, the Government will secure their long term-position as anchor institutions in their regions, on a par with the UK's world-leading historic universities successful institutes of technology will in future be able to apply for a Royal Charter.

We will also increase access to HE particularly in towns, cities and rural locations without access to this provision.

As part of the launch of the £2.6 billion UK Shared Prosperity Fund, adults across the whole of the UK will benefit from the multiply programme, offering national and local support for people to gain or improve their numeracy skills, worth £559 million over the SR21 period.

I will place a copy of the full list of the education investment areas and the methodology for their selection in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS585]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19 Vaccinations: Condition of Deployment

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): In December 2021, Parliament approved legislation requiring vaccination as a condition of deployment (VCOD) in health and wider social care. This was due to come into force from 1 April 2022.

On 31 January I announced the Government intention to revoke the regulations making vaccination a condition of deployment in all health and social care settings. This is subject to consultation and Parliamentary process.

I have listened to the best clinical and scientific advice and considered how we can achieve public health and safety with the minimum number of restrictions or requirements on people's lives. The changes in the pandemic as a result of the omicron variant and the continued success of the vaccination programme mean it is right that we revisit the balance of risks and opportunities that guided our original decision last year.

Whilst vaccination remains our very best line of defence against covid-19, and all people working in health and social care settings have a professional duty to be vaccinated, the view of this Government is that it is no longer proportionate to require vaccination as a condition of deployment through statute.

Following this announcement, I am now providing further clarity on how this planned revocation impacts on the 3 February deadline for a first dose of covid-19 vaccination for those currently working in CQC-regulated health and wider social care settings. I am aware that, based on the guidance already issued, those who employ or engage staff working in health and wider social care settings may have begun to prepare for formal meetings with staff if they remain unvaccinated.

With the announcement of our intention to revoke this legislation, the Government's clear advice is that those employers do not serve notice of termination to employees in connection with the VCOD regulations.

NHS England has written to healthcare employers requesting that employers do not serve notice of termination to employees affected by VCOD regulations. Furthermore, my Department has written to the adult social care sector and advised that employers in wider adult social care do not serve notice of termination to employees in connection with the VCOD regulations.

I want to acknowledge the incredible efforts of the health and social care sector over the past year to encourage staff to receive their covid-19 vaccinations. These have been very much appreciated. Since September there has been a net increase of over 127,000 people working in the NHS who have been vaccinated. During the same time, we have also seen a net increase of 32,000 people vaccinated in social care including 22,000 people in care homes and 10,000 people working in domiciliary care.

My Department will move quickly to publish a consultation as legally required, and will continue to keep all those affected updated.

[HCWS587]

Covid-19 Testing: Transparency

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): I am today laying in Parliament a set of documents in response to the Humble Address motion of the House of Commons passed on 17 November 2021.

The Department of Health and Social Care has followed a rigorous process to identify and quality assure all relevant documents. Specialist document review software was used to identify references to "Randox" across

56 ministerial private office and special adviser email accounts. The Department also asked current and former ministers and special advisers who could have been involved in correspondence about the specified meeting and contracts to provide relevant records from their private systems. The Department reviewed approximately 11,000 records to identify the documents laid today.

We are committed to ensuring transparency in order that Parliament is able to scrutinise and hold the Executive to account. However, the Government also have a responsibility to consider whether it will be in the public interest to place information into the public domain. This necessitates balancing the need for openness against other important and long standing, and often competing, principles, such as the need to protect legal confidentiality and Cabinet papers for reasons of collective responsibility, and legislation, such as the Data Protection Act.

This has been a costly and time-consuming exercise. Initial searches identified 1.5 million pieces of information relating to Randox. This was narrowed to the approximately 11,000 documents which then needed individual review in order to determine whether they were relevant or in scope of the Humble Address. Those which have been identified as in scope have been published, subject to public interest considerations such as the application of data protection principles towards named staff. Had this been a Freedom of Information Act request or Parliamentary Question, this exercise would have passed the disproportionate cost thresholds.

As noted in the Government Response to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee's Fifteenth Report: "Status of Resolutions of the House of Commons" in March 2019, "the Government therefore agrees with PACAC that this device should not be used irresponsibly or over-used. As the Committee notes, such powers lack statutory force and if they cease to be exercised responsibly, the Government will have to reflect carefully on what measures may be required in order to protect how it should respond in the public interest."

As the public would expect, at the start of the pandemic the Government took every possible step to rapidly build the largest testing industry in UK history from scratch, this has played an important role in stopping the spread of covid-19 and saving lives, and the service Randox provided was integral to that response.

There are robust rules and processes in place to ensure that all contracts are awarded in line with procurement regulations and transparency guidelines and that any potential conflicts of interest with respect to commercial matters are appropriately managed. Ministers are not involved in the assessment and evaluation process for contracts.

Building the scale of testing needed at an unprecedented speed required extensive collaboration with businesses, universities and many others, to get the right skills, equipment and logistics in place as quickly as possible. We make no apology for working at an incredible pace to tackle the biggest public health emergency in living memory.

I want to take the opportunity to reiterate my thanks everyone who has worked tirelessly across Government, the private sector and beyond to help deliver one of the biggest testing programmes in Europe.

[HCWS586]

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 3 February 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
TRANSPORT	431	TRANSPORT—continued	
Aviation Sector	440	Modern Railway: 200th Anniversary	436
Bus Service Improvement Plans	444	Public Transport: Night-time Safety	441
Closed Rail Lines: Restoration	438	Rail Services: South-east London	437
Condition of Roads	434	Rail Services: Yorkshire	435
Cycling and Walking	443	Rockets and Satellites	443
Docklands Light Railway	445	South Western Railway	431
Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency	432	Ticket Inspection	441
Electric Vehicles	436	Topical Questions	446
Fuel Duty Freeze	440	Transport for London: Financial Settlement	442
International Travel Restrictions	433	UK Supply Networks	437

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 3 February 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CABINET OFFICE	16WS	HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	20WS
Commission for Racial Equality Pension and Life Assurance Scheme	16WS	Covid-19 Testing: Transparency	21WS
		Covid-19 Vaccinations: Condition of Deployment	20WS
EDUCATION	17WS	LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES	15WS
Capital Spending	17WS	Ebbfleet Garden City: Update	15WS
International Teacher Training Qualification	18WS	Elections	15WS
Levelling Up Missions: Education and Skills	19WS		

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CONTENTS

Thursday 3 February 2022

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 431] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Transport

Business of the House [Col. 453]
Statement—(Mr Rees-Mogg)

Economic Update [Col. 471]
Statement—(Rishi Sunak)

Covid-19: Purchasing Effort [Col. 493]
Statement—(Edward Argar)

Northern Ireland Border [Col. 505]
Statement—(George Eustice)

Backbench Business [Col. 517]
Government's Education Catch-up and Mental Health Recovery Programmes [Col. 517]
Motion—(Robert Halfon)—agreed to
Committee on Standards: Members' Code of Conduct Review [Col. 541]
Motion—(Chris Bryant)—agreed to

Kazakhstan: Anti-corruption Sanctions [Col. 567]
Debate on motion for the Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Cumberlege Report [Col. 213WH]
General Debate

Written Statements [Col. 15WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
