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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 7 February 2022

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

NEW MEMBER

The following Member took and subscribed the Oath required by law:

Annalissa Firth, for Southend West.

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Yesterday, 6 February, marked 70 years since our Queen acceded to the throne following the death of her father, King George VI. The House will pay a more formal tribute in due course, but I know that I speak for all Members in placing on the record our thanks to Her Majesty for her great sense of duty and her lifelong commitment to public service.

Hon. Members: "Hear, hear!"

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Progression out of Low-Paid Jobs

1. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What steps she is taking to support progression out of low pay jobs. [905446]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I associate myself with your comments, Mr Speaker, on the magnificent service of Her Majesty the Queen.

People can use the Train and Progress scheme to access courses so that they can progress out of low-paid jobs. We are appointing progression champions throughout the country and, from April onwards, will open up access to work coach support to address skills barriers or wider barriers to progression among people who are already in work.

Peter Aldous: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for that answer. In sectors such as offshore wind and nuclear power in Suffolk, either there are skills shortages or new opportunities are emerging. Currently, many people are not able to acquire the skills needed for such jobs because of the rigid and complex universal credit conditionality rules. Will my right hon. Friend agree to a review of universal credit conditionality, as she and I have discussed and in accordance with the new clause that I have tabled to the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill?

Dr Coffey: As my hon. Friend is my neighbour, I am conscious of the opportunities in his constituency thanks to the Government investment, alongside that of private investors, in our progress to net zero. I do not agree with him that we need to reshape student finance in such a way; that is not the purpose of universal credit, and only a limited number of people can undertake that training. I assure him that Train and Progress, which I mentioned, the lifetime skills guarantee and the opening up of access, as well as apprenticeships to get into a sector in the first place, are better ways to make sure that we help people to get on in work.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I similarly associate myself and all my colleagues with your remarks before questions, Mr Speaker.

The Government know that, as the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) suggests, there is a problem with progression out of low pay, because they commissioned the Ruby McGregor-Smith review, which reported in July last year. In January this year, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), told me that the Government would publish their response "shortly". Meanwhile, kickstart has failed to deliver and, as the journalist Ed Conway pointed out this afternoon, in the past year the average house has earned more than the average 18 to 29-year-old in this country. That is a disgrace. Will the Secretary of State announce today when she will at last publish the Government's response to the Ruby McGregor-Smith review of low pay? Will she say how the Government propose to make progress on two key issues that the review identified: public transport and childcare?

Dr Coffey: I reject the hon. Lady's assertion that kickstart is not working. More than 130,000 young people have now had access to a proper job in which they have gained employability skills, so it has been an effective response. At the same time, she will be aware that there are more people in work on payroll than there were before the pandemic. People are making good progress in that regard.

The review is important. I will be candid and say that I am the person who has held it up, because I want to make sure we have got all the questions answered as best we can. Meanwhile, we continue to work across Government on some of the hurdles that people are trying to get over, such as childcare and similar issues. I hope that the response will be published shortly.

Menopause: Women Leaving the Workplace

2. **Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the economic impact of women claiming benefits after leaving the workplace early due to symptoms of the menopause. [905447]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): Too many women feel forced to leave work, reduce their hours or take a step back in their careers because of the impact of the menopause. That is why I asked my Department for Work and Pensions "50 PLUS: Choices" team to work with employer organisations and produce the "Menopause and Employment" report. I will be responding to the recommendations in the report shortly.

Carolyn Harris: A poll by the Fawcett Society reported that a quarter of employees currently experiencing the menopause said they would consider leaving the workforce. Furthermore, 10% are actually doing so. That is one in 10 experienced and talented women who have symptoms of the menopause leaving their jobs and their incomes, and potentially entering the benefit system. I know the Minister understands the issues that these women are facing, so would she consider creating a resource specific to women and their employers to help them overcome those barriers and keep more women in work?

Mims Davies: I absolutely agree about the challenges when it comes to employment. That leads us to the need for a longer-term plan for pensions and everything that comes with it. Indeed, one in 100 women experience menopause by the age of 40. The hon. Lady and I were both in the first cross-Government taskforce, with the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), on Thursday. This is a key agenda point, and I look forward to working with the hon. Lady on it.

Poverty: Pensioners

3. **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to tackle levels of poverty among pensioners. [905448]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I welcome the hon. Lady to her place in the House of Commons, and I welcome back the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan). It is good to see her back in her place—I am pleased to see that.

The practical truth is that pensioner poverty has reduced under this Government. This Government increased state pension by 2.5% in 2021-22 and will uprate it by 3.1% in 2022-23. We are also spending approximately £5 billion to support 1.4 million pensioners through pension credit.

Helen Morgan: Pensioners across North Shropshire and the rest of the country are falling into poverty. Last week, a retired couple from Ellesmere, in my constituency, contacted me to tell me that even though they live in a modest bungalow, because of the rising costs of their food and energy bills they have been put in the heartbreaking position of having to choose between heating and eating. That is a choice no one should ever have to make.

Rural communities are being hit hardest by the energy bill price hike, and they have higher numbers of pensioners hit by the suspension of the triple lock. In Shropshire, the Conservative-led council is pushing through the maximum council tax increase this spring. What steps can the Secretary of State or the Minister take to ensure that our retired residents are not put into this dreadful position of choosing between heating and eating?

Guy Opperman: I refer the hon. Lady to the specific points set out by the Chancellor last week, namely the £144 million-worth of discretionary funding, the non-repayable £150 cash rebate and the £200 smoothing rebate on energy bills for all households. Those are in addition to the ability to claim for pension credit, which is, of course, a passport to many different pension awards in many different situations.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): This Government have a very good track record when it comes to protecting pensioners against poverty, not least through the state pension triple lock and the pension credit. However, will the Minister sit down with his colleagues the Employment Ministers and look at participation rates in the workforce among older workers? Some estimates suggest that there are now around 200,000 fewer older workers in the economy than there were pre-pandemic. It is important that we bring out all the skills in the economy, not least to fill some of the employment gaps.

Guy Opperman: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point, as he should do, being a former Secretary of State and very wise on these issues. The Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), has set out the “50 PLUS: Choices” programme and the amazing package of work that is available to people over the age of 50 who wish to return to the workplace. I am certain that if my right hon. Friend was to sit down with her, and other colleagues, there would be much that we can do in this particular space.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): Before I start, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his very moving, very personal and very brave tribute to our friend Jack Dromey last week. It is hugely appreciated across the House.

I disagree with the Minister: pensioner poverty is increasing. As we have heard, many pensioners are facing an impossible choice between heating and eating. Pension credit and the basic state pension are being cut in real terms today. He mentioned the package the Chancellor announced. A million pensioners are on the council tax benefit reduction. Will those million pensioners who do not pay council tax get the £150 rebate automatically or will they have to apply for it? If they have to apply, will he guarantee that 100% of pensioners will get that money this April?

Guy Opperman: First, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind comments. I wanted him to stop there, but I fully understood why he did not. On his specific point, I understand that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is publishing guidance on that today.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Can my hon. Friend the Minister confirm that before this Government came into office in 2009-10, the state pension was £95 a week and that this year it will rise to £185 a week? Does he agree that this explains why there are over 200,000 fewer pensioners in absolute poverty than there were a decade ago?

Guy Opperman: Under the coalition and the Conservative Government there has been a record increase in the state pension. We have never spent as much as we now spend on the state pension—£105 billion. It has almost doubled compared with under the last Labour Government. The practical reality is that there is £129 billion when all the other benefits are added in. As I say, it has never been a larger figure. My hon. Friend is right: there are 200,000 fewer pensioners in poverty than there were previously.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Despite what the Minister said at the Dispatch Box earlier, his Government's statistics show that even before the effects of the £700 energy cap kick in, pensioner poverty is at a 15-year high, with 2.1 million pensioners classed as living in poverty. The Red Book also shows that the removal of the pension triple lock is going to take £30 billion out of the pockets of pensioners over the lifetime of this Parliament. What impact assessment have the Government undertaken on the removal of the triple lock, and how many more pensioners are going to be plunged into poverty?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Gentleman will know that there are 200,000 fewer pensioners in absolute poverty than in 2009-10. Through the triple lock and the work that the coalition Government did and this Conservative Government have done, we have never paid pensioners more. There are also the three matters set out by the Chancellor previously. I spent some of the weekend reading "Scotland's Future" and I see that the SNP has now abandoned its previous position on the state pension—a question that SNP Members did not want to raise today, I conclude.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Minister ensure that supporting our pensioners remains a top priority across Government? What is he doing personally to ensure that as many pensioners as possible benefit from the Chancellor's support package on energy prices?

Guy Opperman: Yes, of course, is the short answer. We are doing a huge amount, particularly on pension credit, which addresses the situation of low-income pensioners. We are working with the BBC, various energy companies, Age UK and many other organisations to get greater take-up of pension credit. It is a cross-departmental initiative to ensure that there is take-up of the various things that are available, as announced by the Chancellor last week.

Disabled People's Benefits: Cost of Living

4. **Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab): What recent assessment her Department has made of the adequacy of benefits for disabled people in the context of increases in the cost of living. [905449]

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Chloe Smith): The hon. Lady will know that the personal independence payment is aimed at providing assistance to disabled people with extra costs. As the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), has just outlined, alongside the £9 billion energy bills rebate announced on 3 February the Government are providing £12 billion of support over this financial year and next to ease cost of living pressures, with help targeted at working families, low-income households, and the most vulnerable.

Alex Davies-Jones: The increasing cost of living is having a huge impact on so many people, and instead of doing the right thing, this Government buried a £70 million stealth cut to disability benefits in the autumn Budget. For the hundreds of thousands of people impacted, I ask the Minister: exactly how does she expect disabled people to manage their rising energy bills while this Government stand by with woefully inadequate proposals?

Chloe Smith: I am afraid the hon. Lady has simply misread things. What she is referring to in the spending review is our intention to create extra support for the most severely disabled. She needs to read it again.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I asked the Minister if she would publish the NatCen report into disabled people's experiences of the benefits system. She said no. The Work and Pensions Committee used its powers to publish the report instead. Having reviewed this research, it is crystal clear what the Government were hiding. Disabled people are struggling on a day-to-day basis. Does she agree that the money disabled people receive is not enough to cover their additional living costs? If she does agree, why has her Department not done anything to address it?

Chloe Smith: I fear we have some serial misreading going on here. As the research shows, health and disability benefits, alongside other income streams, such as passporting and the Motability scheme, help to meet almost all identified areas of additional need.

Vulnerable Children: Support

5. **Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Education on support for vulnerable children. [905450]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I met the Secretary of State for Education in January to discuss shared priorities on a wide variety of issues, including vulnerable children.

Robert Halfon: My right hon. Friend will be aware that our Education Committee is doing an inquiry into the educational outcomes and opportunities of children in care. We know that 41% of care leavers aged 19 to 21 are not in education, employment or training. I welcome the Government's bursary scheme, but a care leaver over the age of 21 is eligible to receive the bursary for apprenticeships only if they are in education, employment or training. Will my right hon. Friend look into the policy and work with colleagues across Government to see what more can be done to support the 59% of care leavers not eligible for this support?

Dr Coffey: I welcome my right hon. Friend's passion for this particular group of people looking to find work. This is really a matter for the Secretary of State for Education, but the information I have been provided is that all care leavers aged up to 25 who take up an apprenticeship are considered to be in education or training and therefore would be eligible for the bursary.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): From April, the Scottish Government are doubling the Scottish child payment to £20 a week a child. The Scottish child payment, together with the Best Start grant and Best Start Foods, will provide a package of financial support worth £8,400 by the time eligible families' first child turns six. None of this support is available anywhere else in the UK. Have the UK Government considered matching the level of support that the SNP Scottish Government are offering to families with children in Scotland?

Dr Coffey: I do not think we have undertaken that assessment. Of course, a benefit of being part of the United Kingdom is the subsequent extra money per head that is given through the Barnett formula, and the Scottish Government can decide what to do with that. I am sure they will be carefully costing their independence things, or that sort of financial support will simply not be there.

Armed Forces Champions in Jobcentres

6. John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What progress is being made by the work of armed forces champions in jobcentres. [905451]

10. Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): What progress is being made by the work of armed forces champions in jobcentres. [905456]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): In April 2021, we updated the offer in our jobcentres, boosting our network of armed forces champions to 50, supported by 11 area leads. They are focused on providing key support to our veterans and other members of the armed forces community to ensure that their talents and abilities are recognised and that they can move quickly on to their next step. I saw that in action on Thursday at the military careers fair in Aldershot with the Veterans Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty).

John Lamont: As the Minister will know, our veterans have particular skills and needs. Can she confirm that veterans in my constituency in the Scottish Borders, whether they attend a jobcentre in Hawick, Galashiels or Eyemouth, will be able to access the support offered by their district armed forces champion?

Mims Davies: Yes, I can confirm that they will. The great work that is being done by our DWP armed forces champions in my hon. Friend's constituency is playing out, for example, in how the local champion from High Riggs jobcentre has already been working with the local council to secure bus passes for veterans, alongside providing veterans with direct employment support.

Karl McCartney: With Lincoln and Lincolnshire continuing to have a growing armed forces community—with RAF Waddington playing a national role and the Royal Anglian Regiment 2nd Battalion celebrating its freedom of the city last Friday—delivering the champions scheme along with other important parts of the armed forces covenant is important to my constituents, not least Councillor Bill Mara in Witham ward. What more can be done in respect of the scheme to signpost veterans to these services?

Mims Davies: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. In Lincoln, the armed forces champion is already receiving good feedback in their role. They work with several councils and local homeless veterans to make sure that those veterans get suitable housing. In fact, in the case of West Lindsey District Council, they worked with adult social care to get permanent housing for a claimant with a history of alcohol addiction. They are also helping claimants who are veterans back into work,

using the flexible support fund and working with local employers and employment agencies.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): In theory this should be an excellent initiative, but the Minister will know that the previous veterans action plan, for 2019 to 2021, promised to

“increase the number of Jobcentre Plus Armed Forces Champions and District Leads from the current position of around 45 unfunded, part-time posts to funding an Armed Forces lead in each Jobcentre Plus District and 100 support posts.”

That is not happening, so how can the Minister claim to be supporting the work of armed forces champions, while cutting the number of paid posts?

Mims Davies: We have a new model of 11 armed forces champion leads across the DWP districts. We are working with armed forces champions and the covenant locally. We have 50 armed forces champions across the jobcentre network. With covid, of course, some of this upskilling and these add-ons were paused, but we are absolutely committed to making sure that our veterans get the best service at DWP.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her response. In Northern Ireland, the role of the armed forces champions in jobcentres and in district councils presents difficulties with the security of some ex-soldiers. What discussions have taken place with the Minister or with jobcentres in Northern Ireland to ensure that veterans in Northern Ireland can access these services?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue. Universal credit now has an identifier to help us enhance support for all our claimants who may have a veteran background. Many people do not declare that background and can be working with us for a long time before they recognise that it needs to be understood. Some 83% of veterans are employed within six months, but we need to do better and make sure that all are supported.

Young Jobseekers: Support

7. Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): What support her Department is providing to young jobseekers. [905453]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): Young people claiming universal credit and searching for work are supported through our boosted DWP youth offer. This includes new, dedicated support from youth employability work coaches. Despite the challenges of covid-19, the DWP has opened over 160 new, specialised youth hubs across Great Britain. These innovative and vital interventions contributed to over 130,000 young people starting kickstart roles and, most importantly, to a record low youth unemployment level.

Simon Fell: I thank my hon. Friend for her answer. Last week I was fortunate enough to visit the jobcentre in Barrow. It is rare to meet such a dedicated and enthusiastic bunch of people, and they have really been empowered to do their job, working with young people, using the kickstart scheme, and making sure that young people are prepared and have the clothes they need to get to interviews and get to work. It is absolutely

fantastic to see. With that in mind, could I invite my hon. Friend to Barrow to see the good work they are doing and hear more about the route into work that they are planning for young people in the future?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for such warm, generous feedback. That work happens up and down the land in our jobcentres and I hear similar good news stories every day. I invite those on the Opposition Front Bench to actually step into a jobcentre, see what is really going on, meet the kickstarters and see what this has meant to their lives. In fact, at BAE, not far from my hon. Friend's constituency, one young man has moved into an apprenticeship and is now inspiring people through our youth hubs to do exactly the same by talking about his work journey.

Disabled People: Trust in DWP

8. **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to build trust in her Department among disabled people. [905454]

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Chloe Smith): As we said in our Green Paper, and as I discussed with the right hon. Gentleman last week, we recognise the need to improve disabled people's experience of our services. In response to feedback, we have already committed to changes for the special rules on terminal illness. In the British Sign Language Bill and its supporting work, we also show that we are listening to disabled people with an advisory board of BSL users.

Stephen Timms: DWP's social security advisory committee highlighted just over a year ago the serious problem that disabled people do not trust the Department. Burying the NatCen report, in breach of the cross-Government social research protocol, has made matters worse. The failure to consult properly on the national disability strategy has also now been found to be in breach of the law. As a first step, should the Minister not accept the social security advisory committee's recommendation to establish a protocol for engagement to do the job properly with disabled people?

Chloe Smith: I do want to engage more with disabled people and continue all the work that is going on to listen to disabled people and disabled people's organisations. That is a priority across a number of areas of work for all the Ministers on the Front Bench. I take issue with the right hon. Gentleman's point about the NatCen research and the use of the protocol. As has been the habit of successive Governments, including the one that he served in, protecting a private space for policy development has always been a relevant factor and is a permissible technique for ensuring that we can bring research out at the right time, as we undertook to do in this case.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): In addition to the Minister's vital work with leading health and disability charities, can she confirm that she is fully engaged with the regional stakeholder networks to ensure that a full diverse range of disability voices has an opportunity to shape Government work?

Chloe Smith: I certainly can. My hon. Friend is correct: we need to be able to listen to disabled people and disabled people's organisations of all shapes and sizes. That is what will help us to come to the right conclusions; for example, in the White Paper that we will be bringing forward in the summer.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The NatCen report is a shocking read that again highlights the hostile environment created by the Department. Disabled people are having to undergo cruel and unfit-for-purpose assessments for their employment and support allowance and personal independence payment; face long delays before a decision is made; and, in most instances, must appeal to a tribunal where they have to wait even longer for vital support. Can the Minister understand why, given those experiences, thousands of disabled people feel let down by the Department? What action will she take to reduce long delays and unfair waiting times?

Chloe Smith: We are working to ensure that that benefit gets to the people who need it most as quickly as possible. I must take issue, however, with the hon. Lady's assertion that most claims go to tribunal or reconsideration. They simply do not. I set out the facts on that last week in Westminster Hall.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): I welcome the British Sign Language Bill and the important commitment to ensure that the access to work scheme better meets the needs of BSL users. Will the Minister commit to driving that work forward at pace to ensure that more deaf people are supported in reaching their potential?

Chloe Smith: I am glad to hear that there is support for the Bill on both sides of the House. It is an important piece of work and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) whose Bill it is and with whom I am pleased to work to bring it forward. As my hon. Friend asks, we are all committed to doing that as quickly as we can because there is so much that we can do to support deaf people to be better involved in education, employment and wider society, which is what the Bill aims to do.

Mr Speaker: Before I call question 9, I understand that it has been grouped with question 13 but not questions 20 and 22, which are identical. I find that rather strange. Of course, it is up to Ministers to propose groupings, but I make it clear that if the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) wish to catch my eye, they will be called for their supplementaries.

Child Poverty

9. **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the reasons for the finding in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's "UK Poverty 2022" report that child poverty in families with more than two children increased from 33% to 47% between 2012-13 and 2019-20. [905455]

13. **Kate Osborne** (Jarrow) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the reasons for the finding in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's "UK Poverty 2022" report that child poverty in families with more than two children increased from 33% to 47% between 2012-13 and 2019-20.

[905460]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (David Rutley): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer Questions 9 and 13—and, with your guidance, probably a whole load more—together.

We have long championed the principle that work is the best route out of poverty, based on clear evidence of the importance of parental employment, particularly where it is full time, in substantially reducing the risk of poverty. In 2020-21, there were more children living in a home where at least one person was working, with nearly 580,000 fewer children living in workless households than in 2010.

Helen Hayes: The Joseph Rowntree Foundation highlights that child poverty in families with more than two children has risen, on this Government's watch, to levels not seen since before 1997. Those families are disproportionately affected by increases in the cost of living and are treated punitively by the benefits system. Does the Minister really believe that it is acceptable for children to suffer more just because of the number of siblings they have? If not, what is he going to do to ensure that all families with children have the support they need at this very difficult time?

David Rutley: At a time of record vacancies, the key thing we need to do is to focus on getting parents into work and helping them to progress in work. That is our underlying priority. For those with vulnerabilities, we will make sure that extra support is available through the household support fund. I understand that Lambeth alone has £2.7 million to support people in the borough.

Kate Osborne: The End Child Poverty coalition reports that of the 20 UK parliamentary constituencies that have seen the highest increase in child poverty, 17 are in the north-east of England. My constituency of Jarrow is at No. 5. Will the Minister say what he and the Secretary of State are doing to tackle child poverty, specifically in the north-east?

David Rutley: As I said to the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), our key priority at a time of record vacancies is to encourage people into work. The opportunities for the north-east highlighted in the recent levelling-up White Paper and those sponsored by local Mayors and, indeed, local MPs will be a real boost. Of course, the household support fund will be available. In South Tyneside alone, £1.4 million is available.

20. [905468] **Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Child poverty and destitution are increasing under this Government. In Lewisham, 39% of children are growing up in poverty and more than 14,000 families are on universal credit. Not only have the Government cut universal credit by £1,000 a year; today they are again cutting support in real terms. A lone parent who is out of work will be £300 worse off. That means more children in Lewisham living in poverty. How is that fair?

David Rutley: We need to make sure that we support lone parents into work and help them realise the opportunities that are available. I strongly suggest that they take time to speak to their local jobcentres and work coaches, who can help them get on. Of course, even in Lewisham £2.6 million has been made available through the household support fund.

22. [905470] **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Why do 500,000 children in England not have a bed to sleep in tonight?

David Rutley: We want to tackle child poverty in every way, shape and form. As I said earlier, there are now 580,000 fewer children living in workless households. That is a really important statistic. Helping more people get into work means that, over time, they have the support to stand on their own two feet and look after their children fully.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): We know that the chance that a child will grow up in poverty falls when both their parents are in full-time work. Last Friday, I visited Stafford College ahead of National Apprenticeship Week. What are we doing to help more parents into work, in particular full-time work, to help my constituents in Staffordshire?

David Rutley: We have a full plan for jobs, which sets out a huge range of initiatives from kickstart for the young through to SWAPs—sector-based work academy programmes—and restart, and even a midlife MOT. Those are incredibly important tools that will help people get their children into a better financial situation. Of course, childcare is also available. We spend about £6 billion a year to support childcare. We need to make sure, as the Secretary of State said, that we make that work better for the families who rely on it.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I completely agree with my hon. Friend that the best route out of poverty is work. By lowering the taper on universal credit, we are enabling people to get into work and retain their benefits. Does he agree that that combination has to be seen through the prism of encouraging people to work and to earn their own living?

David Rutley: I strongly agree. I have seen the amazing work my hon. Friend does in his constituency and did previously in Brent and he sets out our clear direction. Through our plan for jobs, and now, in a time of record vacancies, we are putting huge focus on the Way to Work, which I think he will agree provides even more incentives for those getting closer to job readiness to move into a job and then advance their career.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): We know from the Department's own recently published abstract of benefit rates statistics that the real-terms value of child benefit fell by 16% between April 2010 and April 2021. How many fewer families would now be in poverty if that and universal credit had been uprated consistently in line with inflation?

David Rutley: Questions on child benefit are obviously for the Treasury, but the work we are doing to improve the universal credit taper and the work allowance will help a huge number of families to have greater financial security over the years ahead.

Work Coaches in Jobcentres

11. **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): What steps she is taking to (a) measure, (b) improve and (c) publish the performance of work coaches in jobcentres. [905457]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): We often hear in this House about honourable colleagues going into their jobcentres and seeing the marvellous work of work coaches, and we see that by the number of people getting back into work. However, we want to constantly improve the performance of our work coaches in terms of outcomes for people and we will continue to do that.

John Penrose: I completely agree that good work coaches can level up opportunities by breaking glass ceilings that hold people back, but inevitably some will be better than others, as we have seen in schools and other public services. If we publish those findings, every jobseeker and their MP will want to know how their local service compares and how it might be improved, so will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss this as outlined in my recently published work, “Poverty Trapped”?

Dr Coffey: I do not agree with my hon. Friend’s suggestion about the external assessment. I have asked one of my team to look into his report and I am sure we can arrange a suitable meeting, but I want to assure him that all new work coaches are undertaking a level 4 City & Guilds qualification in service delivery.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The DWP is looking to cut thousands of fixed-term contract work coaches at EO level from jobcentres but reportedly will retain almost all staff at the lower-paid AO grade. Have the Government considered how this will impact on lower-grade staff in terms of workload and stress and how those losing their jobs will afford their living costs until they can secure a new role?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady will recognise that this is an operational matter, but she is incorrect; I am conscious that she may have been given that information separately. Last week the permanent secretary outlined the start of the process potentially for people on fixed-term contracts. We need to make sure we have the work coaches in the right parts of the country where they are most needed for both current claimants and anticipated future demand.

Autistic People in the Workforce

12. **Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What steps she is taking to support autistic people into the workforce. [905458]

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Chloe Smith): We are working with the National Autistic Society to test ways to make jobcentres more inclusive of people with autism; this test will inform changes to the wider jobcentre network. We encourage employers to consider autistic people for roles and can offer support where needed to Access to Work.

Huw Merriman: I thank the Minister for that response and the work she is doing. The Office for National Statistics highlighted back in November last year that, tragically, only 25% of autistic adults are in any form of

meaningful employment despite record job vacancies. I am encouraged by the Minister’s additional steps, but what can we do to get the regional adjustments in place so employers really take this seriously?

Chloe Smith: There is a lot that we can do together and this is an effort for the Government, for employers and for others such as the National Autistic Society and the all-party group on autism, to which my hon. Friend gives a lot of time. He asks what we are doing: we are engaging with employers through the disability confident scheme; we are supporting jobseekers, workers and employers through Access to Work; and, as I have said, we are making our jobcentres and youth hubs inclusive in the way they ought to be.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): My constituent has a range of conditions, including autism, which has left him with a mental age of 10. He underwent a telephone work capability assessment without a parent or guardian present, which resulted in a reduction in his employment and support allowance. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the case? What steps are being taken to ensure that autistic people and those with additional support needs are helped into work and not targeted in such a manner?

Chloe Smith: I would be happy to look in more detail at this case—or ask officials to do so—which appears to raise a number of issues. More generally, we are absolutely committed to supporting disabled people appropriately into employment that might be right for them. To do that, for example, there is more than £1 billion of funding in the spending review for disability employment. All our providers who conduct benefits assessments have training in a wide range of conditions so that they can properly support those whom they are working with.

Benefits System: Fraudulent Activity

14. **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle fraudulent activity in the benefits system. [905461]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (David Rutley): Fraud in the benefits system is an issue that we take extremely seriously. The Department is working on a proactive and comprehensive approach to ensure that those who commit fraud are tracked down and held accountable. That includes undertaking a targeted review of universal credit claims, investing in advanced analytics and expanding our serious and organised crime team.

Scott Benton: The vast majority of my constituents work hard and pay their taxes. They rightly expect the welfare state to be there to support them if they need it, but understandably they have little time for those who seek to exploit the system for their own ends. What investment is the Department making to assist efforts to clamp down on those who seek to rip off the taxpayer?

David Rutley: I understand where my hon. Friend is coming from. In late 2021, the Department secured an additional £613 million that will enable a targeted review of universal credit claims and lead to even greater investment in advanced analytics and in our serious and organised crime team so that we can crack down on fraudsters and save the taxpayer billions of pounds.

Topical Questions

T1. [905471] **Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I am pleased that we have launched Way to Work to help job-ready people get into jobs as quickly as possible. The new approach is focused in particular on bringing many more employers directly into the jobcentre so that we can accelerate the process from application to interview and job offer. In essence, given the number of vacancies right now—particularly in economically important sectors—it is important that we take the ABC approach: any job leads to a better job, which leads to a career.

Mike Kane: What assessment has the Secretary of State made about how the two-child benefit cap negatively affects faith communities, where larger families are more prevalent?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Member and I are both practising Catholics, and I am conscious of the point he is making. However, I am also conscious that the benefit cap takes into account the amount of benefits available to a family compared with median income. It is important that we keep that approach, recognising in particular that the cap can be lifted when people earn, I think, about £605 a month.

T3. [905473] **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): Will my hon. Friend ensure that veterans who leave the services with skills in strategic sectors such as heavy goods vehicles are given support through the Way to Work scheme?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): DWP already has a range of provisions in place to upskill jobseekers to take on key roles such as HGV drivers, including through the sector-based work academy programme, which give claimants the skills and qualifications that they need directly to take up local driver roles.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, may I associate myself with your remarks and thanks directed at Her Majesty the Queen?

I read in the newspapers at the weekend that the Secretary of State is considering resigning over the Prime Minister's rule breaking and partying. Before she heads for the exit door, given that 550,000 children are destitute, half a million children do not have a suitable bed to sleep in and she has cut universal credit by £1,000, why is she pushing through real-terms cuts to support that mean 10 million households will lose £290? How many more children will be in poverty as a result?

Dr Coffey: Mr Speaker, I want to assure you, the right hon. Gentleman and the House that I am fully behind our Prime Minister as he gets on with the job. Not only has he got Brexit done, but we are getting more people on to the payroll and achieving all the other things voted for by the British public in 2019. What I will say to the right hon. Gentleman is that I do

not recognise some of the numbers he used. However, I am conscious of what we will be voting on later. I am also conscious that elements were based on the fact that it was a temporary uplift to universal credit, recognising the impact of what was happening early on, as people new to the benefit system were able to get a similar amount as people on statutory—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just remind Members that topicals are meant to be short and punchy? We cannot have long statements, because there is a whole list of Members I still have to get in. That is why I am trying to cough: to speed you up a little—nothing else, nothing personal.

Dr Coffey: Cutting to the chase, by getting more people into work, people will be better off not only financially but in other aspects of their future prospects.

Jonathan Ashworth: The shadow whipping operation will be pleased that the karaoke queen is standing by the party and the Prime Minister. The right hon. Lady talks about getting people into work. Earlier today, the pensions Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) said that pensioner poverty has gone down. However, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report shows that pensioner poverty is increasing. Why is she today pushing through real-terms cuts to the pension credit and the basic state pension, which will result in more pensioners in poverty?

Dr Coffey: As we will discuss later, the one-year approach we take every year is the basis on which almost all benefits are uplifted. We will continue to have that consistent approach.

T5. [905475] **Mr Richard Holden** (North West Durham) (Con): Last Friday, I paid another visit to Consett jobcentre in my constituency to see the great work it is doing. This Friday, I am hosting an apprenticeships fair in my patch. Auto-enrolment in pensions has transformed the lives of millions of people in constituencies across the country, including in mine. Those aged 18 to 22, who will be attending my apprenticeships fair and going into work, will not benefit yet from auto-enrolment. Will the Minister confirm that he will look at that and do what he can to ensure that everybody in work benefits from auto-enrolment in Britain?

Guy Opperman: I congratulate my hon. Friend, who is also my constituency neighbour and a massive improvement on his predecessor. Auto-enrolment is a massive success as you know, Mr Speaker. I promise my hon. Friend that we will build on that work with the automatic enrolment review. I look forward to reading his Bill in great detail.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): We know the benefits regime is counterproductive and punitive. In 2016, the National Audit Office told the Department for Work and Pensions to carry out its own research into benefit sanctions. The Department is now refusing to release that research, despite promises to Committees of both Houses, because it was “unable to assess the deterrent effect”.

Why is the Secretary of State ruthlessly pushing ahead with the renewed sanctions regime if almost six years later it still cannot find any evidence that they work?

Dr Coffey: The sanction regime has not changed. In fact, sanctions have been at a record low over the past year. We are applying a sensible approach, recognising the number of vacancies, so that we can help people to get back into work as quickly as possible.¹

T8. [905478] **Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con): When the lovely Karen came in to celebrate her new job, I saw at first-hand the impact of work coaches like Victor and Harlon at Eastbourne's Jobcentre Plus. The untold story is perhaps how brilliantly the same Jobcentre Plus can support employers. What work is the Minister and the Department doing to promote that aspect of their work, so we can double down on local unfilled vacancies?

Mims Davies: We have seen 130,000 people going into work through kickstart, working with employers. Way to Work is exactly the same, so we can showcase that local talent to local employers at JCPs.

T2. [905472] **Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): Kevin Dooley, the father of a constituent of mine, Leanne Dooley, took his own life after the DWP decided to stop his benefits. Leanne was one of five bereaved families who wrote to the Secretary of State calling for an urgent public inquiry into deaths related to the benefit system and asking for a meeting. Six months on, the Secretary of State has not replied. Will she agree today to meet that group of bereaved families, including my constituent, Leanne?

Dr Coffey: I am very sorry for the family of the individual to whom the hon. Gentleman refers. It is the role of the coroners to undertake appropriate investigations. I am surprised, and am sorry to hear, that the letter has not gone back. It is not my intention to meet them, recognising the ongoing work that we continue to do to try and provide service to such people.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Afghan refugees in north Hampshire have been supported through the hard work of many organisations, including our local jobcentre. Many of those refugees now want to get back into employment. What specific support is my hon. Friend giving to that group?

Mims Davies: There is incredible work going on across DWP, including the launch of Jobs First. We are in every bridging hotel, our work coaches are at the forefront of helping people into work, and we have great news and great stories every day.

T4. [905474] **Ian Lavery** (Wansbeck) (Lab): The Minister will be very much aware that Dupuytren's contracture is a prescribed industrial disease, but the prescription for that disease is causing so much confusion and concern. Will the Minister be kind enough to agree to a meeting with me and others to discuss those outstanding issues?

Chloe Smith: I recognise the points that the hon. Gentleman is making, and I think he will be pleased to see some updates coming out very shortly on this matter.

T6. [905476] **Kim Leadbeater** (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Constituents in Batley and Spen who contact me regarding issues they are having with PIP, universal credit and other benefits mention the complexity of both the application and appeals processes and the length of time they take. Bearing in mind that many of these people are facing huge physical and mental stress and, given the current cost of living crisis, are really struggling financially, what steps are being taken to simplify and speed up those processes?

Chloe Smith: A number of steps are being taken to ensure, as I said earlier, that we get the right benefits to people at the right time, in order that they have the support that we recognise they need. In addition to that general point, we have tried to improve processes in a number of ways during the pandemic. I would be happy to write to the hon. Lady with a little more detail so that she can understand the situation.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): We have heard on several occasions about visits to jobcentres, and I have had the opportunity to visit Rugby on several occasions to see the excellent work of the work coaches there. Will the Minister thank them for their work, together with the 13,500 extra work coaches that we have provided to deliver the Way to Work plan?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the daily work that is going on in our jobcentres through Plan for Jobs, Way to Work, and our new additional jobcentres—150 more have opened, and 160 youth hubs. They are absolutely changing people's lives, and we are committed to helping people to progress.

T7. [905477] **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Recent Citizens Advice research shows that an astonishing 80% of people with no recourse to public funds are behind with one or more essential bills, and 60% are behind on rent. When will the Secretary of State and the Home Secretary get together to stop forcing people into poverty through these abysmal no recourse to public funds rules?

Dr Coffey: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, it is for the Home Office to make that decision, and of course, people who are in that situation can apply to the Home Office for it to be changed. It is a fundamental principle that if people are coming into the country, we want people to be able to support themselves, rather than rely on extra support to which they knew they would not be entitled.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): Jobcentre staff across the country are doing excellent work getting people back into jobs, but a team in the east midlands led by my constituent Nicola Brindley are also doing fantastic work on top of their day jobs to spot jobcentre users who are victims of domestic abuse, and connect them to the help they need. The scheme is called J9; it is named after a lady called Janine Mundy, who was murdered by her former husband. Will the Minister join me in thanking Nicola Brindley and her amazing team of volunteers, and will she come to Nottingham to meet with the J9 team and learn more about the incredible work they do?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting that brilliant work. It is efforts such as those—the flexible support fund, the trust and empowerment that

1. [Official Report, 28 February 2022, Vol. 709, c. 5MC.]

we have in our jobcentres, and working with the employer covenant on domestic abuse and getting people into work and back on their feet—that are changing lives every day, in Rugby and other local areas. I am delighted by DWP staff across the land, and proud of them.

T10. [905480] Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): A constituent sent me the following message:

“I am concerned for April 1st this year. My fire will be turned off and I will start to feel the cold. At seventy eight years, I did not expect to face, like many others, a six hundred pound rise in my gas bill which I cannot afford. How come this government is not bothered about the people?”

That plea comes on top of the news that, for millions of people, the Government’s new energy bill rebate will be wiped out by a real-terms cut to their pension. What will the Secretary of State say to my constituent and to all the pensioners whose hardship will be compounded by the Government’s flawed energy rebate plan?

Dr Coffey: What I will say is that we continue to try to support pensioners through aspects of pension credit, but it was inaccurate to say that what was proposed was a statistical anomaly. That is why we took the steps we took, and that is why we will continue the debate later today.

Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con): I recently hosted the first ever jobs fair in Blyth Valley. It was an amazing success, with more than 50 local businesses taking part. Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking the Port of Blyth, the DWP and all the local firms that made it possible?

Mims Davies: My hon. Friend, again, raises the work of local DWP teams and jobs fairs, which we have seen in Way to Work. Up to 409,000 more people are on payrolls as a result of the DWP’s hard work in my hon. Friend’s community and more widely.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): My disabled constituent Ann’s monthly fuel bills of £95 have now risen to £140 and will rise to £200 in April; she also faces inflation-busting care costs. In her budgeting, she has to choose between heating and eating—exactly the problems that were highlighted in the NatCen report. Who benefited most from suppressing that report: my constituent Ann or the Government?

Chloe Smith: I am rather more interested in the hon. Gentleman’s constituent Ann than in party political game playing. I sincerely hope that his constituent Ann

will be able to benefit from the £9 billion package that the Government have laid out, which comes on top of £12 billion and is targeted at the most vulnerable. Meanwhile, we are spending record amounts on health and disability benefits: £59 billion this year.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I recently visited Basildon jobcentre and heard how it is bringing employers in to engage with work coaches and jobseekers. Does my hon. Friend welcome that new initiative, which helps to break the stereotypical view of those who use jobcentres to find work?

Mims Davies: As a result of the pandemic, many people who never expected to need help have worked with the DWP, as we have heard. Many Conservative Members have seen just what a change that has meant for people. Again, I invite Opposition Front Benchers to actually go down and see what is happening in local communities.

Mr Speaker: What a pleasure it is to see Amy Callaghan.

Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): In July 2020, I met my constituent Stacey Conlin—not at a constituency surgery, but in the physically disabled rehabilitation unit at the Queen Elizabeth University Hospital in Glasgow. We recovered from our strokes alongside each other, and I got to hear her story.

Too many people like Stacey have survived catastrophic life events only to be let down by this Government’s woeful welfare system—unable to work and unable to pay for basic necessities that many of us take for granted. Will the Secretary of State commit to revisiting the current levels of universal credit so that stroke survivors such as Stacey can fully live their lives instead of barely getting by?

Dr Coffey: I am very conscious of the important work that the hon. Lady has delivered, including the status that was addressed for her, and I am conscious that my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) and I have also undertaken such elements in the national scheme. I am more than happy to find out about the specific example that the hon. Lady refers to, but I know that generally we are trying to make sure that this is the right approach and that people have that access to work.

Elective Care Recovery in England

3.34 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on the publication of his Department's plan for elective care recovery in England.

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): The covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on healthcare systems everywhere. The NHS has performed incredibly, caring for covid and non-covid patients alike and delivering the vaccination programme that has helped us to open up this country once again. Throughout the pandemic, we had to take steps to ensure that we could treat those with the greatest clinical need and that we provided a safe environment for those who needed covid care.

As a result, there is undeniably a huge covid backlog that needs urgent attention. The number of people waiting for care in England now stands at about 6 million, and we know that that figure will get worse before it gets better. Furthermore, our best current estimate is that about 8.5 million people who would normally come forward for treatment have not done so during the pandemic. However, we are pulling out all the stops to help the NHS recover and ensure that patients are receiving the right care at the right time.

Hon. Members will be aware that the Government will have invested more than £8 billion in the NHS in the three years from 2022-23 to 2024-25. As part of the new health and social care levy, we will be putting huge levels of investment into health and social care over the coming three years, and all the time we are announcing new solutions to the problem of how we can ensure that the NHS is on the firmest possible footing for the future.

On Friday we launched a call for evidence that will inform an ambitious new vision for how we lead the world in cancer care. As the Prime Minister announced earlier today, we are setting out some tough targets for the NHS on cancer. We want to ensure that 75% of patients are diagnosed or have cancer ruled out within 28 days of a GP referral, and to return the backlog of people waiting more than two months for their cancer treatment to pre-pandemic levels by March 2023. Today the NHS has also announced the launch of a new platform, My Planned Care, which will provide patients and their carers with relevant and up-to-date information ahead of planned treatment, including information on waiting times for their provider.

I am under no illusions about the fact that our health system is facing an enormous and unprecedented challenge. That is why we are doing everything in our power to support the NHS and its patients, recovering services to reduce waiting times and deliver more checks, operations and treatments. We are faced with a once-in-a-generation challenge. We know that we must get this right. We are working with the NHS and across Government to deliver a targeted and far-reaching plan for elective recovery, and we will update the House at the earliest possible opportunity.

Wes Streeting: Thank you for granting the urgent question, Mr Speaker.

This is not a covid backlog; it is a Tory backlog. We went into the pandemic with NHS waiting lists already at a record 4.5 million, and now 6 million people are waiting on those lists—more than ever before. More than 1 million are waiting for scans and tests used to diagnose cancer, and the NHS itself is waiting—waiting for the Government's plan to deal with the backlog. So where is it? It was due to be published today but was pulled last night. It is like something from "The Thick of It", but the reality is worse than fiction—a photo op without a plan; the Government's own NHS recovery plan just another cancelled operation. But there is no need to worry, because there is a website coming that will tell people that they are waiting a long time, even if there is no plan to ensure that they do not-.

Then there is the "reason" for the delay. Briefings from the Department for Health and Social Care claimed that the Chancellor had blocked the plan. As one Government official said,

"it's pretty obvious it's about Treasury reluctance to rescue the PM".

Is this where the shambles of the Conservative party is taking us? Is the Chancellor seriously playing political games while 6 million people wait for care? No wonder the Health Secretary has not bothered to show his face this afternoon. He is probably still recovering from the embarrassment of this morning's media round, where the big announcement was literally that there was no announcement. So it has been left to the Prime Minister to clear things up, which tends to go almost as well as breakfast television with the Culture Secretary. No wonder she has been dispatched to the middle east.

Let me turn to the "tough targets" that the Minister mentioned. Today the Prime Minister announced a new target that no one should wait longer than two months for cancer diagnosis, but there is already a target for the vast majority of cancer patients to be treated within two months of referral, and it has not been hit since 2015. Is this not just another example of the Conservatives lowering standards for patients because they consistently fail to meet them? The Prime Minister has also announced that three out of four patients should receive a cancer diagnosis within 28 days, but that is an existing target that was introduced last April and has never been met.

The waiting list crisis is the chickens coming home to roost after more than a decade of Tory failure. The Treasury blocked a plan for staffing and it is now blocking the plan to cut waiting times. Is it not now clear, amid the chaos, confusion and spectacular incompetence on display, that the longer we give the Conservatives in government, the longer patients will wait?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the shadow Secretary of State. As he said, 2 million of those on the waiting list have entered that waiting list since the pandemic began. There is undoubtedly a huge covid backlog, as we had to put in place infection prevention and control measures and ensure the availability of beds for those with covid. I am with him, I suspect, on at least one point, which is that I, like him, entirely understand the impact that this has on people's lives, their anxiety and their health outcomes. That is why this Government are determined to tackle that waiting list. As I said, this is a once-in-a-generation challenge and it is absolutely right that we make sure we get the plan right. We need to ensure that we have the right plan, delivering the right outcomes.

[Edward Argar]

The hon. Gentleman mentioned delays, and I have to say that this plan is delayed. This is a plan we anticipated publishing in December. The reason that we did not do that was because of the omicron variant and the impact it has had on our health services over the winter. We have made sure that we get this plan right.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned Her Majesty's Treasury. I have to say, speaking as a Minister in the Department of Health and Social Care, that we could not wish for better partners than Her Majesty's Treasury and this Chancellor. They have shown strong support to our health and care system throughout the pandemic, with record levels of funding to support it through the pandemic and to help performance to recover subsequently.

Even before the pandemic, when the current Secretary of State for Health was Chancellor, this Government had already put in place a £33.9 billion increase in funding, enshrined in law. It was one of the first pieces of legislation passed by this Government after the election. We have also set out our long-term funding plans through the health and care levy, which I recall the hon. Gentleman's party did not support.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): We are grateful to the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), for his sub-leadership bid in raising this important topic. I say to the Minister that today was not an unusual day, in that a constituent wrote saying that she had nothing but praise for the hospital treatment she was getting. Can I pass on my thought, which is that instead of using the word "elective" we should use the words "planned care", as my hon. Friend did in his response? Through him, I also remind the House that two years into the last Labour Government there was an edict saying that no hospital could do elective care—planned care—until two years past the time when it was booked. Things are much better now and most of us are grateful.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the Father of the House, who once again brings his typical wisdom and experience in this House to our deliberations in the final point that he makes. He is absolutely right. I am happy to join him and his constituents in expressing gratitude to all those who work in the NHS for the work they have been doing throughout the pandemic and that they do every day, irrespective of the pandemic. I know that those on both sides of the House will share in that. The term "elective" is a technical term used within the NHS, but I take his point that it is easy for us in this House to use the technical terms used within our Departments or in the system, but that it is often helpful if we talk in rather more simple terms that mean something to all our constituents.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): As a survivor of breast cancer that was treated in 2019, I was grateful to be seen within 10 days of the referral by my GP and to start treatment within a month. It is frightening that in the months between April and November last year over 90,000 women who might have breast cancer were not seen by a specialist within the target of 14 days of being urgently referred by a GP, and that this year half a million people with suspected cancer will

wait longer than the supposed two-week maximum to see an oncologist. The Minister will know that an early diagnosis can be life-saving. What does he think the impact for potential cancer patients will be of the delay to the NHS recovery plan when waiting times are spiralling so much?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady and I often exchange views across the Dispatch Box, and she always asks sensible and reasonable questions. She is right to highlight the importance of cancer care, and that there are some illnesses and diseases like cancer where delay can have a significantly detrimental impact on the outcomes experienced by patients.

Between March 2020 and November 2021, more than 4 million urgent referrals were made for cancer, and over 960,000 people received cancer treatment. Thanks to the amazing work of NHS staff, we maintained cancer treatment at 99.7% of pre-pandemic levels in the latest month for which I have statistics, which is November 2021.

As well as looking to the future with the announcement of community diagnostic hubs and a range of other measures, the plan is not necessary for us to do the work, as we are already doing it. The plan is important for mapping out the future direction of care, but we are not waiting for the plan to improve services, to build back better and to tackle the waiting lists.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): If the Treasury was not holding up the plan, can we be told what was holding it up? When will we get the plan?

Edward Argar: I am grateful, I think, to my right hon. Friend for his question. As I set out, it is important that this is the right plan and that it does the job for which it is intended. We are working closely with other Departments to make sure the plan, when it is published, does the job for which it is intended, and I look forward to its imminent publication.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is essential that we address cancer treatment capacity. The Minister talks about diagnostics, which is important, but it is a horse and cart or a hand and glove. I know he is aware of the enormous unharnessed potential of high-tech radiotherapy as a solution to time-critical cancer backlogs, but it still receives only 5% of the cancer budget. Such investment could take enormous pressure off the NHS, especially at this time. Will he arrange a meeting with the Secretary of State so that we can explain to him the important role that advanced radiotherapy could play in tackling the cancer backlog?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman and I have previously met to discuss this issue, and I share his view on the value of radiotherapy in helping to tackle the cancer backlog, and more broadly as a treatment. Ministers and I are always happy to meet him.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My hon. Friend spoke earlier of this Government's record level of investment in the NHS, but each patient waiting for cancer treatment is undergoing a very long and frightening experience as they wait longer than needed. As he focuses on reducing this backlog, how

will he ensure that the record level of investment is focused directly only on measures that will reduce the backlog and is not wasted?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend knows of what she speaks, as a serving consultant in our NHS. She is right that investment is important but that the outcomes are what really matter. We have set out measures such as the community diagnostic hubs, which are bringing diagnostic capacity to local communities and making it more accessible. That is just one example of how we will ensure that the money delivers the required outcomes.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Health conditions do not wait until a medic or a bed is available. They deteriorate, often very quickly, and every single one of the 6 million people on the waiting list will have to rely on their GP for extra appointments and extra treatment, and they will possibly rely on their GP to deal with severe complications. What support will there be for primary care while all these people are waiting for their planned secondary care?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady makes a very important point, and I take this opportunity to put on record my gratitude to all those in general practice for the amazing work they have been doing over the past two years. Again, they are the front door to the NHS for patients and all our constituents. Last year we set out the additional funding being made available to help general practice recover from the changes that had to be made during the pandemic, and we continue to look at the system as a whole, not in its component parts. She is right that general practitioners are often the people our constituents go to if their operation is delayed or if they need additional care while waiting for an operation, so it is important that we provide support to general practice, too.

Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con): Given that health service waiting lists are higher in Labour-controlled Wales and that my Bridgend constituents are being told that they are going to have to wait until at least 25 March to find out what Labour's plan is in Wales, does my hon. Friend agree that much of what the Opposition have said here today would be better directed down the M4 towards their Welsh Labour colleagues?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who puts his finger on an extremely important point. I believe that one in five in Wales is on a waiting list. This Government have put in place measures already to help bring down waiting lists, and the plan is due to be published imminently, but we are still waiting to see what the Welsh Government intend to do—or whether they even have a plan.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): May I urge the Government to abandon this talk of a “war on cancer”? It was Richard Nixon's term and it was thought to be outdated back then. To many people, when Ministers talk about fighting cancer and how somebody has been particularly plucky or courageous for fighting cancer, it feels as though they are telling off the people who do not survive for not being courageous enough. I know that that is not what anybody means, so may we completely change that language? As I understand it, the Prime

Minister has also announced another cancer target today: to get to 75% of all cancer diagnoses being made at stage 1 or stage 2. How on earth is he intending to get to that?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. He speaks often on this topic from experience, and it is right that we listen carefully to him. I take his point about the importance of language and how different terms and approaches to it will be interpreted by people who are undergoing treatment or a diagnosis for cancer, and I take the point in the spirit in which he meant that observation. On the Prime Minister's target, the Prime Minister is unapologetically ambitious in seeking to tackle waiting lists and improve performance on cancer care. That is why we are investing record levels in our NHS and bringing forward new diagnostic hubs. It is also why the hon. Gentleman will see measures in the plan, when it is published imminently—coupled with the plan that the Secretary of State set out on Friday—that will help to reassure him, but I am always happy to talk to him about these issues.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): My hon. Friend is surely absolutely right, first, to prioritise this vital catch-up programme for our constituents and, secondly, to ensure that we deliver real value for money. At a time of high taxation overall, my constituents want to ensure that for every pound of hard-earned taxpayers' money spent on this vital programme they are really getting 100p of value as a result in delivery. I assume it is for that reason that this programme is slightly delayed.

Edward Argar: The reason this plan is delayed is, as I have alluded to, the omicron variant and the impact it had on our NHS. My right hon. Friend makes an important point about our prioritising tackling waiting lists and waiting times. He is also absolutely right: this is a once-in-a-generation challenge, and it is right that we get the right answer—the right outcomes for patients and for taxpayer. That is what we will do with this plan.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): These waiting times are misery, pain, frustration and agony for my constituents, and then there is the mental anguish of not knowing what is happening or going to happen. I have constituents who are begging and borrowing the money to go private because they cannot stand the pain. Is that the Minister's plan for the NHS: driving people into the private sector? If it is not, what is his plan?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady is right in some of what she says. We can all appreciate what she says about the impact that a wait for treatment can have on those waiting, in terms of health outcomes and, as she rightly mentions, challenges for people's mental health as they worry about their diagnosis or when they are going to receive the treatment they need. That applies not only to those who are diagnosed with a life-threatening condition, but to those who have a life-limiting condition or who need orthopaedic surgery, eye surgery or similar, where it has an impact on their quality of life, their ability to work and so on. She makes an important point about that.

As I have set out to the House, we have already made significant strides, as we have come out of this pandemic, in setting out—through the community diagnostics hub

[*Edward Argar*]

and through our approach to surgical hubs—how we can rapidly ramp up the number of planned surgeries that are undertaken. We have to be honest with people that that list will get worse before it gets better, because people who have not come forward will do so. Equally, the golden thread running through is our NHS workforce, and we have to recognise that the people who will be tackling this waiting list are the same people who were working flat out through the pandemic. We have to make sure we give them the space and the support to recover physically and emotionally.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his work on this matter. He will know that in order to tackle waiting lists, our NHS staff need the very best buildings and equipment. We have seen some fantastic investment in Scunthorpe General Hospital, but will he meet me to discuss our plans for a longer-term investment in and upgrade to the hospital?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is a champion in this House for Scunthorpe General Hospital, and since her election she has never ceased to lobby, politely but firmly, on its behalf. I am delighted to agree to meet her.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): If we are going to deal with this backlog, we need to deal with vacancies in the NHS. That means we do not have time to wait for doctors and nurses to be trained; we need qualified staff now. Can the Minister say where he is going to get those staff? Is he looking abroad? Where is he going to find them?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman makes a sensible and serious point. As I said earlier, it is about the workforce. Buildings and technology are fantastic, but it is the people who operate them who really make the difference. I can offer him the reassurance that we are already well on target to meeting our 50,000 nurses pledge from the 2019 manifesto. In October 2021 there were thousands more doctors and thousands more nurses in our NHS compared with October 2020. We continue to grow that workforce from a whole range of sources, including the additional medical school places that this Government delivered a few years ago.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): There is no question but that the waiting list is impacting on my constituents' quality of life, but I fail to see how taking £36 billion out of the system would help. Can I ask my hon. Friend to look further upstream and tell me how the very welcome 10-year cancer plan announced on Friday will improve our health and prevent more complex future interventions? Will he confirm that the 28-day cancer standard, which does sound familiar—I left office three years ago next month—is a maximum, not a target? In other words, we always want to do much, much better, because we know that the quicker cancer is caught, the better the outcome.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for touching on the 10-year cancer plan. He is absolutely right that the earlier the diagnosis, the better the outcome, as a rule, in cancer treatment. Yes, we set targets, but we always hope to exceed them. It has been incredibly

challenging to do that over recent years, and that is why we as a Government are not only investing the resources, but putting in place the reforms that are needed to achieve these targets.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): I start by thanking all the NHS workers, who have done a tremendous job throughout the pandemic. My mum has been waiting for shoulder replacement surgery for more than two years, and the delay in this plan means that she will live with excruciating pain. Can the Minister give us assurances that this backlog will be dealt with in a timely fashion, and that that work will be adequately resourced and funded?

Edward Argar: I join the hon. Lady in gratitude towards all those working in the NHS. I am sure that every Member of this House will receive correspondence from constituents who are in the position she outlined. Understandably, they will be distressed and often in pain. This plan is not a necessary precursor for work to be done to bring that waiting list down and get it under control; such work is already under way. As I said, not only is record investment in resources going into it but, while the Government focus to a degree on that, we also focus on what that taxpayers' money does in delivering outcomes for people—hence why we have already announced the community diagnostic hubs and set out plans for surgical hubs. We are very grateful to all the charities and campaigning organisations that have, over recent months, engaged with us to help to advise on interventions that they think can make a genuine difference to waiting lists, but also to keeping patients informed and supported while they do wait.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): How much greater would the backlog be if we had not successfully resisted the entreaties of those modellers, and indeed politicians, who wanted another shutdown over the Christmas period?

Edward Argar: It is always hard to prove a counterfactual, as my right hon. Friend will know, but we do know that the necessary measures we took during the pandemic to help to tackle this dangerous virus inevitably had a significant impact on waiting lists. Due to infection prevention and control measures and a range of other things, normal levels of surgery and planned surgery were not able to go ahead. He may be able to extrapolate from that, but, as I say, it is slightly difficult to come up with a detailed counterfactual.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): My mother died prematurely of lung cancer in her early sixties, so I know, as many others in this House do, that when it comes to cancer, waiting times do not just inconvenience; they literally mean the difference between life and death. I agree with the Minister that this is about not just investment but outcomes, and it is purely on outcomes that this Government are failing. Does he agree that the briefings from his Department suggesting the political games at the top of the Conservative party—"Who's up, who's down, who's going to be the next leader?"—are influencing and impacting on the Government's ability to get this plan out, and that that will not be forgiven by those people who are waiting for cancer treatment right now?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his willingness to share with the House his personal experience in respect of his mother. I think that in doing so he probably speaks for a number of Members of this House, and certainly a number of our constituents. He said it is important that we focus on cancer, and he is absolutely right. Clinical prioritisation will be a key part of how we address bringing the waiting lists down, because it is right that we focus on the illnesses and diseases where the longer the delay, the greater the risk of not making a full recovery or of a negative outcome. He is right to highlight the focus on cancer as on certain other key areas. On his final point, I do not share that view. I believe it is right that we get this plan right so that it delivers the outcomes we need. As I have said to a number of hon. and right hon. Members, I do not believe that the plan is a necessary precursor for getting on with taking a number of steps, as we have done as a Government, to start to bring the waiting lists down.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Does the Minister agree that there must be an important role in this programme for smaller hospitals such as St Cross in Rugby, where on a recent visit I saw some brand new operating theatres providing important extra local capacity?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his shout-out for his local hospital. He is absolutely right: we need to utilise the resources and the capacity of the whole system, and this is the approach we are adopting. Often, the debate can focus on the large, acute district general hospitals, but he is absolutely right that smaller hospitals, community hospitals and indeed community facilities all have a part to play in helping to tackle this waiting list.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Long delays in diagnosis and inappropriate and sometimes outdated treatment are typical for those living with the condition ME. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on ME, I was pleased to see the new National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines on treatment of the condition. Can the Minister detail what steps are being taken to implement those and to ensure speedy diagnosis and appropriate treatment?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady raises an important point. I know that the House is grateful for her work on this important issue. She highlights the NICE guidelines, which are an important step forward. We continue to work with NHS England on how to most effectively ensure that patients with ME get the early diagnosis and treatment that they need. I or the relevant policy Minister will be happy to meet her to discuss progress and her and the APPG's thoughts and ideas in that space.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Minister is right in what he says again and again. I remember a few years ago, a close relative had liver cancer. They went to see the consultant and were given a one in three chance of surviving but managed to pull through. At the same time, another Government plan for the NHS was announced. I said, "What about that?", and they said, "Well, we just ignore it, because they'll change it again in a few years. What we actually do is get on and do best practice now." I think what the Minister is saying is happening at the moment. What the Government

could do in the plan is cut red tape in the NHS, which might speed up the construction of the hospital that we need in Kettering, which is so welcome.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend not only for his well-timed plug for his local hospital in Kettering but for his important point. The NHS and the Government have been getting on with improving things and trying to bring service levels back to pre-pandemic levels. Notwithstanding his comment about plans more broadly, it is important for us to have a clear long-term strategic approach to it, because the sums of money involved are significant. The waiting lists and the impact on those are significant. It is right to ensure that we have a clear plan and clear metrics to show how that public money will deliver the outcomes that we all want to see delivered and that those patients want to see.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Waiting lists for joint replacements are at a record high. I have been contacted by dozens of constituents with arthritis who are waiting in a lot of pain. What can the Minister say specifically about joint replacements to the more than 600,000 people who are waiting for them nationally? Has he met Versus Arthritis about the issue?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady makes an important point. Orthopaedic surgery, for want of a better way of putting it, is a hugely important part of the planned care and surgery that the NHS does. Although it does not have a direct impact on someone's life chances in the same way that oncology does, it certainly affects their quality of life and their ability to enjoy it. I hope that I can give her some good news: I believe that I am due to meet Versus Arthritis, with which I have spoken in the past, later this week to discuss its work in this space and its ideas on how we can incorporate that in our work.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): One in nine people in England are on a waiting list, which is clearly too high. I take confidence from my hon. Friend's statement and the constructive tone with which he is responding. The figure in Wales is one in five. Does he share my disappointment and dismay at the tone that has been taken by the shadow Front-Bench team in particular, when waiting times in Wales are much longer and the number of people waiting is much higher?

Edward Argar: My right hon. Friend makes an important point, which was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Dr Wallis) earlier. I am sure that the shadow Secretary of State will be asking his colleague in the Welsh Government where their plan is.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The Minister will be aware of the shocking 77% rise in the number of children needing specialist mental health care for suicidal thoughts and self-harm between 2019 and 2021. Headteachers in my constituency cite that as a No. 1 issue, but their staff simply cannot cope with the numbers and severity of need. Parents are beside themselves as their children in crisis are sometimes waiting a year to access treatment. As it is Children's Mental Health Week, will the Minister make a commitment to children, young people and their parents up and down the country that children's mental health will be an urgent priority alongside all the urgent operations that need to be done?

Edward Argar: Since the hon. Lady was elected, she has had a long track record of interest and campaigning on that issue. She is absolutely right to raise children's mental health. Before I was a Minister, I took a close interest in eating disorders, which are an element of that—I worked with Beat the eating disorder charity—and in the challenges that parents face in getting access to child and adolescent mental health services for a first consultation and for the required treatment. I absolutely reassure her that mental health, including children's mental health, remains a priority for the Government.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I very much welcome the record high levels of funding the Government are putting into the national health service and the rolling out of rapid-diagnostic centres throughout the country. May I seek an assurance from the Minister that the diagnosis and treatment of blood cancers will be a key element of that rapid diagnosis?

Edward Argar: I can give my hon. Friend that reassurance. The clinical decision making will rightly inform the approach we adopt to the diagnosis and treatment of cancers, as my hon. Friend would expect, but he is absolutely right that we cannot neglect blood cancer in that context, and nor will we.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The elective recovery fund had perverse thresholds written into it, so those hospitals that really struggled and battled with the pandemic were the very ones that did not get any money. Will the Minister ensure a fair distribution of funding in his plan, so that hospitals such as my local one in York that are still battling with very high levels of covid get the resources they need?

Edward Argar: I am happy to reassure the hon. Lady that our approach, and that of NHS England and Improvement, is designed to ensure that all hospital trusts can make progress—hopefully rapid progress—in tackling their waiting lists and get the resources they need to do that.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): A key way in which we could get more money directed towards frontline services and elective care would be to fix Labour's disastrous private finance initiative deals. Will the Minister meet me and the South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust so that we can look into how we can fix Labour's PFI debt at hospitals such as the James Cook?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the huge financial challenges that trusts were saddled with following Labour's PFI deals and I am of course delighted to agree to meet him to see what we can do to try to untangle the worst of them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers, which reflect the fact that he understands the need to do better and wants to improve. Will he outline what discussions have taken place among the devolved Assemblies and the Government here to prevent healthcare from becoming a postcode lottery in the UK? Does he acknowledge the fact that, although waiting lists for appointments were worsened by the covid crisis, they were poor beforehand, so all regions need to work together to address the issue of recovery?

Edward Argar: I am being open and honest at the Dispatch Box about the scale of the challenge and about the challenge for us in tackling it, and the hon. Gentleman is right to highlight that. In respect of the devolved Administrations, I regularly speak to—I would like to meet in person but we regularly meet remotely—the Northern Ireland Health Minister, Robin Swann, whose work in this space I pay tribute to. We talk about a range of issues, not just waiting lists and the impact of covid, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right and I am always happy to have conversations with my opposite numbers in the devolved Administrations.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I appreciate the fact that 2 million people have been added to waiting lists throughout the pandemic—it is foolish to try to pretend that that has not made a big difference—and I also appreciate the Government's £12 billion-a-year plan to help to address the situation. Needless to say, many of our constituents continue to wait in pain for elective surgery, including hip and knee replacements. The Minister will know my views about orthopaedic services in Ipswich and some of the concerns I have had about the new centre in Colchester. It could be that the increased capacity in Colchester cuts waiting times, but there is still an issue about people getting to Colchester so that surgery can take place. Will the Minister meet me to update me on how he is ensuring that Ipswich people are at the heart of all future developments when it comes to the hospitals trust?

Edward Argar: I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend. Following his election in 2019—a fantastic result in Ipswich—he was one of the first new colleagues I was able to visit and, with him, I saw Ipswich Hospital for myself. He makes an important point: in looking at the healthcare system in Ipswich and Colchester, it is important that we ensure that the people of both Ipswich and Colchester get access to the best possible facilities, which is exactly what my hon. Friend campaigns for.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I thank the Minister for the work he and his Department are doing to support our NHS. Can he confirm that the 100 new community diagnostic hubs will speed up referrals processes, particularly in coastal communities with historically poorer health outcomes, ensuring that residents receive diagnoses and treatments swiftly?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is exactly right in what she says. The whole purpose of these community diagnostic hubs is to bring cutting-edge diagnostic facilities to the heart of our towns, our rural communities, our seaside communities and our cities to make it much easier for people to access the diagnostic tests they need.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): Cromer Hospital is the jewel in the crown of our hospital facilities in North Norfolk, but as my hon. Friend will know, it is 25 miles from the nearest main hospital, the Norfolk and Norwich, and I have many older residents. Will he meet me to discuss the viability of an urgent treatment centre? That would not only be a huge benefit to my demographic, but would go hand in hand with tackling the elective backlog.

Edward Argar: I am always cautious to caveat any example with “subject to funding available and Her Majesty’s Treasury”, but I am always happy to meet hon. and right hon. Members to discuss their ideas in respect of their local communities and the services those communities need, because it is hon. and right hon. Members who know their communities best.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): I draw the Minister’s attention to an exciting new proposal for a model surgical hub in the east midlands, which would tackle the backlog by focusing solely on elective surgery. The plan is being developed by surgeons in Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire, including my constituent Dr Tony Westbrook. Will the Minister join me in welcoming this innovative plan and thanking everyone involved in drawing it up? Will he join me in calling on regional health authorities to give it serious consideration?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend makes an important point. What we have seen throughout this pandemic, and we continue to see it now as we look to tackle the waiting lists, is people across the health and care system innovating and coming up with exciting new ideas and new ways to achieve the outcomes that we desire. I will certainly look into the specifics that she talks about, and I congratulate all those involved on their willingness to innovate and come up with new ways of doing things.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I welcome today’s statement, and I take this opportunity to thank all those healthcare workers who have worked on the frontline throughout the pandemic, particularly nurses, who have worked so hard to keep services operating. I am therefore reassured that we

have seen a 21% increase in nursing applications in the past year alone. Will my hon. Friend confirm first that that will help us meet our manifesto commitment to recruit 50,000 extra nurses, but, more importantly, that it will help make their lives easier by reducing their workload somewhat?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is right on a number of counts: first, to pay tribute to the work of nurses up and down the country during this pandemic; and, to highlight the significant progress we have made on the trajectory to meeting our 50,000 nurses manifesto commitment. The reason we made that commitment is exactly as he says: we know we need more nurses in the NHS, and we are committed to recruiting them, which will have a positive impact on all those already in our NHS as they are joined by many newly qualified professionals to help share that load.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Blackpool was one of the first areas to receive additional funding to tackle the NHS covid backlog, and this funding is already making a difference on the ground for my constituents. When further moneys are allocated, will the Minister commit to prioritising those areas, such as Blackpool, that have some of the worst health outcomes in the entire country?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is a strong champion and a strong local voice for Blackpool in this House. We are clear in this Government that in the investment decisions we make, we are committed to making sure that we level up across this country and that that money goes to where it can make the greatest difference in improving outcomes for all patients and all those who use our NHS.

Prime Minister's Chief of Staff Appointment

4.19 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on his appointment as Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister and associated machinery of government changes.

Mr Speaker: Michael Ellis—you're welcome.

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

Before I begin, I am glad to have this opportunity to offer my congratulations to Her Majesty the Queen on reaching the 70th anniversary of her accession. She is a hero to me and millions of others, and I know that the House will join me in wishing her many more years.

In a statement to this House last week, the Prime Minister pledged to make changes in the way Downing Street and the Cabinet Office are managed, so that we can get on with the job that this Government were elected to do, and that is what the Prime Minister is in the course of doing. As the Prime Minister has said, we need to continue our recovery from the pandemic. We need to help hundreds of thousands more people into work. We need to deliver on our ambitious agenda to level up the entire country, improving people's opportunities regardless of where they are from.

The changes that the Prime Minister made to his senior team over the weekend will bring renewed discipline and focus to his programme of priorities and deliver them faster for the people of the United Kingdom. In his statement to the House last week, the Prime Minister accepted in full the general findings of the Cabinet Office's second permanent secretary, Sue Gray, in her investigation into alleged gatherings on Government premises during covid restrictions. The Prime Minister offered a sincere apology and also accepted Sue Gray's recommendation that

"we must learn from these events and act now."—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2022; Vol. 708, c. 23.]

In response, as the House will be aware, the Prime Minister has asked my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to provide political leadership within No. 10 as his chief of staff. As the Government have set out, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will be in charge of further integrating the new Office of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Office to make operations at the heart of Government more efficient and effective, and ensuring that the Government agenda is better aligned with the Cabinet and Back Benchers. He will be working very closely with the Cabinet Secretary on the new structure. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will also work directly with his Cabinet colleagues to ensure that levelling up is a priority for all Departments and is delivered at a rapid pace that brings about tangible improvements in the day-to-day lives of the people of this country.

For the avoidance of any doubt, I would like to make it clear to the House that, in undertaking this role, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has been given additional responsibilities. He remains a member of the Cabinet and is not a special adviser. The Prime Minister

is expanding on the already cross-cutting role of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and giving the chief of staff enhanced, ministerial authority to promote levelling up while also playing a senior co-ordinating role in No. 10 under the direction of the Prime Minister.

There are wider benefits to this new approach. It will significantly strengthen Cabinet Government, meaning an enhanced role for both Ministers and Parliament itself. This is a chief of staff who will himself answer to the electorate and who therefore has the democratic authority to direct civil servants and special advisers as a Minister of the Crown, something an unelected adviser cannot do.

Finally, the Government set out that there would continue to be further appointments over the coming days, with a particular focus—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not sure whether the Minister is aware that this is a UQ not a statement. Only three minutes is allowed for the Minister; you are now on four, so I am sure that you are coming to the end.

Michael Ellis: Thank you, Mr Speaker—I was just on my last sentence. I was saying that the Government set out that there would continue to be further appointments over the coming days, with a particular focus on improving engagement and liaison with Parliament. Full ministerial responsibilities will be announced in due course.

Angela Rayner: I echo the Minister's comments regarding the Queen.

It is always nice to be at the Dispatch Box against the Minister but, quite honestly, where is the chief of staff? The Minister mentions what the Prime Minister said. He also said that this change gives "an enhanced role" for Parliament, yet the chief of staff's very first act is to refuse to even turn up here to explain his own job. But maybe the Paymaster General can tell us: is it a ministerial job, a public appointment, a party role—it is not a special adviser—or is it something that does not even exist yet? Apparently, the chief of staff will not get a salary; perhaps he should join a trade union. Will he appoint or manage advisers or officials? How will he relate to the permanent secretary? Who will appoint staff, as the Minister mentioned, to the new office of the Prime Minister? When will the office be set up, and on what budget, or has the Chancellor given him a blank cheque? Is the post to have a separate Department from the Cabinet Office or are they to merge? How will he answer to us: will he face me here as the chief of staff or as the Minister for No. 10? Is he still in charge of dealing with the channel crossings, tackling the pandemic, protecting the Union, veterans policy and every other priority of the Cabinet Office? This Government are in chaos and the country is paying the price.

Michael Ellis: It is always a pleasure to appear shadowing, if I may put it that way, the right hon. Lady, but she will know that the chief of staff role was created by Tony Blair in response to Labour figures such as Jonathan Powell and Alastair Campbell, who had, of course, huge powers in the Blair years to direct civil servants and who were unelected. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is answerable to this House and will present a full range of responsibilities to this House in due course.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that nobody is better qualified to be both chief of staff and Chancellor of the Duchy and Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office than my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), given that he already has the widest possible experience of interdepartmental responsibility, for the Treasury, for health, for financial services and for Brexit, and has the comprehensive knowledge and capacity both to understand and to have the necessary authority and stature to carry out the new functions allocated to him?

Michael Ellis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, as usual. One could hardly have a more qualified person to be chief of staff than my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), a former Secretary of State answerable to this House, and now Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, an elected person answerable to this House as well as the electorate.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I am sorry that the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) is not in his place because I wanted to congratulate and welcome the country's new senior civil servant to his post. I do not quite know how someone who already has two full-time jobs is going to salvage Downing Street's reputation when the Prime Minister has often claimed that they all broke lockdown rules and regularly get tanked up in Downing Street because of the immense workload and the pressure of the job. However, there is something far more serious here: paragraph 3.12 of the Erskine May "Public service disqualification" section says:

"All persons employed either whole- or part-time in the Civil Service are disqualified; and it is immaterial whether they are serving in an established capacity".

It is clear as day that the right hon. Gentleman is the new chief of staff at Downing Street and he is also a serving Member of this House; he cannot be both, and according to Erskine May he has disqualified himself from that role. So, when will the Government be moving the writ for the by-election?

Michael Ellis: I had no idea that the hon. Gentleman presented himself as an expert in Erskine May, but I have to say, with respect, that I do not think many others would. The reality is that my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) is not a civil servant; he remains a servant of this House—a servant of the people of this country—democratically elected and highly accountable.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): On the whole, Governments do not do things well, so will my right hon. and learned Friend persuade the new chief of staff to concentrate the Government's efforts on doing fewer things a bit better?

Michael Ellis: As the House will recognise, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has a long history of ministerial service in this House, which he has performed par excellence. I have no doubt, and nor do my colleagues, that he will continue to perform his functions with excellence, whether they be in 10 Downing Street or elsewhere.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): But being chief of staff to any Prime Minister is more than a full-time job—and to this Prime Minister, with everything we know about him, it is an impossible one. Just look at the collateral damage of those who have fallen by the wayside having come within close proximity of him. How will the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire do all those jobs and serve his constituents?

Michael Ellis: In the same way, if I may suggest, that the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster can also be the shadow Minister for the Cabinet Office, shadow Secretary of State for the future of work, shadow First Secretary of State, deputy Leader of the Opposition, deputy leader of the Labour party and Member of Parliament for Ashton-under-Lyne—highly accomplished appointments.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): The appointees announced over the weekend are significant figures, but in any office restructuring, and particularly one such as 10 Downing Street, disruption is inevitable. What reassurance can my right hon. and learned Friend provide that that is taken into account and that the sole focus will be on delivering for the Government?

Michael Ellis: My right hon. Friend is quite right to raise that point. I assure him that the Prime Minister and Government's entire focus is on delivering on the manifesto promises that resulted in the biggest Conservative election victory that we have seen since the 1980s. We are, have been and will continue delivering on them.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): As perhaps one of the Members of the House most prolific in asking questions of the Cabinet Office, I note that the Department is incredibly slow in replying to written questions and letters. Does the Paymaster General think that this change will make Cabinet Office responses faster or slower given that the Minister responsible now has even more responsibilities? Was being Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster just not enough?

Michael Ellis: To be fair, I think that I am responsible for answering parliamentary questions, and I think I am right in saying that the statistics have dramatically improved in the last four and a half months.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I certainly welcome the fact that unelected officials are being replaced by Members of Parliament in the Government, because one problem in recent years has been the drift, with Government and Parliament going in opposite directions, so having Members of Parliament in these positions will improve things. Does the Minister agree that, had this change been imposed a while ago, it would have been great fun to have had Dominic Cummings at the Dispatch Box to answer questions?

Michael Ellis: I am not going to agree with my hon. Friend on that point, if he will forgive me. However, I do agree with the substance of his point—he has hit the nail on the head—that accountability, transparency and the link with Back Benchers of this House will be delivered thanks to this appointment.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is a bit difficult, is it not, to argue that there will be greater accountability when at the first hurdle the man is not even here to be accountable? It is a preposterous appointment—a sow's ear of an appointment—which confuses the various different aspects of Government and makes it far more difficult for us to hold the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) to account. Does anyone in Downing Street yet realise that the problem is the lack of control; it is the lack of accountability; and it's the fibs, isn't it?

Michael Ellis: I do not know what the hon. Member means. What I do know is that the Government are delivering on our manifesto promises, as I said. He must recognise that there will be increased transparency and accountability because an elected Member of Parliament answerable to this House will be chief of staff at No. 10.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): We are making changes at No. 10, and still that lot over there on the Opposition Benches keep moaning and whining. Does the Minister agree that if they want to have a say in who works at No. 10, they should do something they have not done in 20 years—win a general election?

Michael Ellis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): My constituents are rightly concerned to see the Prime Minister pursue a departmental merger, the cost of which is likely to surpass £10 million in taxpayers' money, at a time when we are facing a cost of living crisis. It is well documented that No. 10 is used for living and working, with porous boundaries, and we are all well aware of the Prime Minister's well documented frustrations with his flat. Will the Minister rule out any public money being spent on any additional refurbishment of the Downing Street flat, in the context of this merger?

Michael Ellis: I do not think the Downing Street flat has the smallest thing to do with this matter. It is and has always been the case that the 10 Downing Street operation is an integral part of the Cabinet Office. They are already interconnected physically, metaphorically, literally and in every other way. This change recognises that and creates a new avenue of increased democratic accountability by having a chief of staff at No. 10 who, for the first time, can come to this House and speak from this Dispatch Box.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I am sure that moving bums on seats works, and I am confident that it will in this case. I am sure my right hon. and learned Friend will agree with me that a stream of blue narrative Conservative policies will now burst out of No. 10.

Michael Ellis: We have had those, and we will continue to have more.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): We should remind ourselves why we are in this predicament, or why the Government are in it: the Prime Minister made a slur against the Leader of the Opposition during the statement last Monday, accusing him of failing to prosecute Jimmy Savile—something that the victims of Jimmy Savile say has no basis in truth and should be withdrawn. What is it about the Government that makes them think they

know better than the victims of Jimmy Savile? Is not that the reason why they cannot find anyone decent to fill these roles?

Michael Ellis: The two things are completely unconnected. The hon. Gentleman is wrong to characterise the appointment in that way. It must be recognised by all and sundry that this appointment is of someone who has served this House and the Government in a ministerial capacity for many years; he could hardly be more experienced. He will present the House with the accountability, transparency and quality of administration that it would expect.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Last week the Prime Minister promised change at the top, and we are seeing it swiftly delivered. I welcome this appointment and the creation of the Office of the Prime Minister, but does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that, as Conservatives, our longer-term ambition should be to reduce the cost of the civil service to the taxpayer?

Michael Ellis: Yes, and the fact that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will accept no extra salary will, of course, reduce costs accordingly. My hon. Friend is quite right.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a real shame that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster could not make it to the Dispatch Box this afternoon. Will the Paymaster General tell us whether the new chief of staff will manage the new communications director, and just what the job status of the communications director is? Government sources have denied this morning that he could return to his lobbying firm, Hawthorn Advisors, if his No. 10 role for some reason—who knows—does not last long. Will the Paymaster General state categorically that that will not happen in any circumstances?

Michael Ellis: It is very peculiar to ask me, from the Dispatch Box, to predict the future, but if I were to predict the future, it certainly would not have Labour in it.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Having worked with the new chief of staff when he was a Secretary of State and having seen his work when he was Chief Secretary to the Treasury, I urge the Minister to ask him to use this as an opportunity. Sometimes, fewer people in No. 10 can operate better than a large number. This is an opportunity to drive efficiencies across those two areas.

Michael Ellis: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. He knows that quality is often better than quantity. That is what we have with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the role that he will perform.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Can the Minister give us an example of a decision that the chief of staff will take in that new capacity, different from a decision he might have taken as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, for which he will be accountable and answerable to this House?

Michael Ellis: I have no doubt that my right hon. Friend will make myriad decisions on a daily basis. The hon. Gentleman will have to wait and see what they are, but they will be decisions that deliver for the people of this country, unlike his party.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I have been listening intently to the urgent question, but I am still confused about what the Opposition are asking. As far as I am aware, this new appointment is what the Gray report wanted and it is the Prime Minister carrying out the Gray report. Are the Opposition saying we should not listen to the Gray report?

Michael Ellis: My hon. Friend is right to refer to the Gray report. One of the points raised was about the fragmentary nature of arrangements. This is addressing that problem directly. I am very surprised the Labour party is not welcoming it with open arms.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): This is absolutely the end of days! My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) asked very specific questions to the Paymaster General, which he has been unable to answer. The reality is that someone has been appointed to a job when it has not yet been decided what the responsibilities are. Will he ensure that, once the Government understand what the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) will actually be doing, he will come to this place and answer the questions my right hon. Friend reasonably asked, so we can actually hold him to account, because this Government are an absolute shambles?

Michael Ellis: I will resist the temptation to say that that is rich coming from the hon. Gentleman. He would know precisely, and his party would precisely know, what a shambles is, and they prove that every day of the week. To answer his question, yes, he will hear from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in due course. He will be presentable and answerable to this House, unlike chiefs of staff who have gone heretofore. That is the fact of this appointment, and it is one the hon. Gentleman cannot answer.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend and I are both very pleased with the new chief of staff appointment. I wonder if he might watch "The West Wing" with me to pick out the best traits of either Leo McGarry or Josh Lyman that our colleague in his new position has.

Michael Ellis: I would like to know what part I could play in such a role. We do have, and we will have, in our chief of staff—[*Interruption.*] I did not hear that, Madam Deputy Speaker. What I will say is that we will have, in the chief of staff who has just been appointed, someone who will be accountable and responsible to the British people.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): It seems the Welsh Government were not forewarned of the Chancellor's intention to introduce a council tax rebate during his statement last Thursday on energy prices, despite that being a clearly devolved policy area. That means no policy has been announced in Wales, leaving many of my constituents, who are already

concerned, in a state of confusion. Will the new Office of the Prime Minister prioritise better intergovernmental relations, so that Wales and Scotland are not blindsided by the British Government's policy announcements?

Michael Ellis: Every Department of Government, without exception, does everything it can do to support the Union of this country.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I must confirm that I am more interested in having a debate about delivery and the role of the chief of staff in delivering the priorities of my constituents, and less in process. I would also say that a criticism of No. 10 is that it can be overly metropolitan in its focus and Westminster bubble-orientated. Does my right hon. and learned Friend think it is actually an advantage to have a Member of Parliament, especially an engaged one, from the Fens, no less? As a Fen boy, I can confirm there is no less metropolitan place than the Fens, and there could be an advantage in that.

Michael Ellis: I have no doubt that my hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): I asked a question of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in this Chamber recently about the failure of the civil service fast track system to recruit black members of staff. Will the Paymaster General give assurances that his right hon. Friend will be able to continue to progress that most serious issue in his new role?

Michael Ellis: The hon. Lady is quite right to ask that question. That is a very important matter and it continues to be. I can give her that assurance.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): In November, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster was drafted in to help solve the illegal crossings crisis in the channel. Can my right hon. and learned Friend assure me that solving this issue remains front and centre of this Government's mission?

Michael Ellis: I can indeed, and I know my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary continues to work on it, too.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): We now have a Spad who is not a Spad, so a special status is being created. Will this be the only appointment with such special status?

Michael Ellis: I do not see this as a special status. This is a Minister of the Crown who remains Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and now has the role of chief of staff at No. 10. It is a highly democratic, highly accountable position. In fact, more so than any of those who went before. The hon. Gentleman should welcome it if he is interested in democracy.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): How many of these Downing Street staff departures in the past few days are a direct result of Sue Gray's report? Have there been any associated findings of culpability against individuals for the failings set out in that report?

Michael Ellis: It is not good practice to discuss staffing and human resources matters on the Floor of the House. The hon. Gentleman knows that the Government are doing what they need to do in response to the challenges with which they find themselves faced.

Points of Order

4.46 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Last Monday, in my constituency, I had the immense privilege of assisting to hoist the holocaust memorial flag to commemorate everyone who was butchered or medically experimented on by national socialism as it dominated the continent of Europe.

As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Gypsies, Travellers and Roma, I was utterly dumbfounded at the weekend when the holocaust was used to poke fun at one of the most marginalised groups in these islands. The Roma and Gypsy community have been part of the story of these islands for millennia and, as co-chair of the APPG, I can tell the House that it was not funny.

Comedy is a useful tool in lightening the mood, and it is often up to us to decide what we believe to be funny. What opportunities are there for Members of this House to show their support and commitment to the dignity of the suffering of all those who lost their lives during the holocaust—Jews, Gypsies, Roma, the LGBT community, Jehovah's Witnesses and many others—such as an Adjournment debate or a Backbench Business debate? *[Interruption.]* Perhaps Conservative Members should listen. What opportunities are there to recognise the value and worth of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community across these islands, and to raise them up, not put them down?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his point of order. He has put his concerns in the public domain very effectively with what he has just said. He asks me what mechanisms there are to raise his concerns. He listed quite a few of them, so he is obviously aware of them. I am sure the Table Office will be able to advise him on any other mechanisms. The Leader of the House is here, too, and he will have heard what the hon. Gentleman had to say. I will leave it at that.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Further to the points of order made by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) on Friday and by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) on Thursday, have you or Mr Speaker had any notification from the Prime Minister of his intention to correct the record of his claim last week that

“we have been cutting crime by 14%”?—*[Official Report, 31 January 2022; Vol. 708, c. 24.]*

As you will be aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, the head of the UK Statistics Authority has said that the statements about crime statistics that were made by the Home Office and subsequently repeated by the Prime Minister were “misleading”. In figures released just the previous week, the Office for National Statistics found

“a 14% increase in total crime, driven by a 47% increase in fraud and computer misuse”.

Clearly the Prime Minister needs to correct the record and be clear that crime has gone up, not down, over the past two years on his watch.

“Erskine May”, resolutions of the House and the ministerial code all say that it is

“of paramount importance that ministers give accurate and truthful information to Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity.”

The Prime Minister made his comments on Wednesday; the UK Statistics Authority wrote to the Home Office and No. 10 on Thursday; there have been two previous points of order on the matter. It is now Monday. This is clearly not the earliest opportunity.

I seek your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker. What is the point of our having a ministerial code and rules of Parliament on correcting the parliamentary record if the Prime Minister continues to ignore them and does not respond to Parliament? How do we ensure that these basic rules and standards for Parliament are not just ripped up?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for notice of her point of order. As she says, the matter has been raised previously. I have to repeat my response to the point of order raised by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain):

“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.”—[*Official Report*, 3 February 2022; Vol. 708, c. 566.]

I am sure it has been heard again, and if an error has been made in this instance, I am sure a Minister would want to correct it as quickly as possible.

The right hon. Lady refers to the ministerial code, paragraph 8.15 of which deals with statistics. I am sure that she will find other ways of pursuing the issue, should she wish to, but as I say, I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard her concerns once again.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You and the House will be aware that last Thursday, the First Minister in the Northern Ireland Government resigned, which has effectively established the position, both *de jure* and *de facto*, that there is now no functioning Executive in Northern Ireland.

I was surprised that there was no statement from the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on Friday or today, because we are now living in difficult times. This House knows how hard-fought this was and how long the then Secretary of State and his predecessor had to operate before we saw Stormont re-established and a functioning Government working again.

There is a duty on the Northern Ireland Secretary to come to the House and explain how the matter will now be taken forward. He has direct responsibility and accountability not only for actions of governance in Northern Ireland, but to this House as to what progress will be made. Can you tell us, Madam Deputy Speaker, whether he has approached you or Mr Speaker to say that he will make a statement? If not, what recourse do we have?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for notice of his point of order. I have to inform him that I have not had notice of a statement on the matter. I note that Lords amendments to the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern)

Bill are on today's Order Paper, hence the presence of the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, so there may be an opportunity to raise relevant matters as part of those proceedings. I accept, however, that that is not the statement that the hon. Member seeks.

Once again, I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the hon. Member's request for the matter to be brought before the House soon; as I say, the Northern Ireland Minister is here. I am sure that the hon. Member also knows, as an experienced Member of the House, that there are other ways in which he can raise the issue.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is further to the point of order raised earlier by the shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper).

Of course we all understand that all Members are honourable Members. Of course we all understand that occasionally we manage, in the cut and thrust of debate, to say things inaccurately. If, however, we then refuse to correct the record, it is not inadvertent any more; it is advertent. It is deliberate, it is intentional, it is a refusal to correct the record. I fully understand why the Chair does not want to get involved, but the Chair always gets involved if someone then chooses to call that out as an advertent lie. That means, then, that the poor Member who has called out the lie gets thrown out of the Chamber, or is forced to use the word “inadvertent” when we all know perfectly well that the Member does not mean “inadvertent”.

I just wonder how we are going to resolve this in the future. As I understand it, the Procedure Committee is meant to be looking at what we do about accusations of lying in the House, but it feels as if this rule is not going to last forever if we carry on like this, does it not?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. As I said before, it has been made very clear from the Chair that if mistakes need to be corrected, they should be corrected as quickly as possible. We have had, I think, three points of order on this now. Again, those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the concern and will, I am sure, relay it back. At the moment, however, the hon. Gentleman is painting a hypothetical picture of the future, because, as I have said, if a mistake has been made, it is up to whichever Minister is involved to try to correct that, if they feel—as I have said—that a mistake has been made.

As the hon. Gentleman has said, the Procedure Committee is looking at this issue in the round, and, obviously, it is something on which right hon. and hon. Members in all parts of the House might wish to give evidence to the Committee.

Yvette Cooper: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank you for that clarification, but given that, in this particular case, we have not only the facts from the ONS but the statement from the head of the UK Statistics Authority—which mean that the Prime Minister needs to correct the record—if there is no response from the Prime Minister or from the Treasury Bench, no explanation, no correction, no

[Yvette Cooper]

change to what they have put on the record, and given what “Erskine May” says, what are we supposed to do?

Madam Deputy Speaker: There is very little that I can add at this stage, apart from saying this. There may be those who say that there are different interpretations of different statistics, so I think that, at the moment, we have to leave it as we have stated: those on the Treasury Bench have heard the concern that perhaps figures were used which are incorrect, and that if that is the case, the ministerial code says that they should be corrected at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it not correct that there are lies, damned lies and statistics, and is it not sometimes a matter of interpretation, not a matter of fact?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I would say that “not necessarily” is probably the answer.

BILLS PRESENTED

ENERGY COMPANY OBLIGATION (CAVITY WALL INSULATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Paul Maynard presented a Bill to require energy companies to remove and replace incorrectly installed cavity wall insulation; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 247).

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS (OPTIONAL PREFERENTIAL VOTE) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Paul Maynard presented a Bill to introduce the optional preferential voting system for Parliamentary elections; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 248).

MINISTERIAL COMPETENCE (EXTERNAL REVIEW) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Paul Maynard presented a Bill to make provision for an annual appraisal of the performance and competence of individual Ministers, conducted outside the Cabinet Office, to inform the Prime Minister in recommending ministerial appointments; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 249).

CHARITIES (INCOME SOURCE STATEMENTS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Paul Maynard presented a Bill to require the Charity Commission to publish statistics of the proportion of income of each registered charity which is derived from public expenditure; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 250).

LOCAL WELFARE ASSISTANCE (STATEMENTS)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Paul Maynard presented a Bill to require local authorities to publish statements of expenditure and the numbers of grants made to residents through the local welfare assistance scheme; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 251).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 16(1) (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents), proceedings on the Motion in the name of David Rutley relating to the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2022 and the Motion in the name of Guy Opperman relating to the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2022, shall be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion for this order; the Speaker shall then put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on those Motions forthwith; such Questions, though opposed, may be put after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—

(Mr Rees-Mogg.)

Social Security and Pensions

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With the permission of the House, the motions on the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2022 and the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2022 will be debated together.

5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (David Rutley): I beg to move,

That the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2022, which was laid before this House on 17 January, be approved.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to consider the following motion:

That the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2022, which was laid before this House on 17 January, be approved.

David Rutley: The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order reflects the Government's continuing commitment to support working families and pensioners across the nation. The order will increase state pensions, benefits and statutory payments by 3.1%, in line with the consumer prices index in September 2021. With support from the House, when the order is passed, the new rates will come into force from April this year. With the approval of this order, in 2022-23 the total Government expenditure on benefits for pensioners in real terms will be £131.1 billion and the total expenditure on benefits for people below state pension age will be £108.7 billion. The pandemic has been a very difficult time for many. Our welfare system, particularly universal credit, has proved agile.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): Before the Minister rushes on from that part of his speech, will he confirm that by uprating in line with inflation last September, given that inflation is likely to be 6% over the year and could be more than 6% by April, according to the Bank of England, what he is proposing is in fact a real-terms cut for those on benefits and the pension?

David Rutley: We are following the policy that Governments have followed for many years, by increasing in line with CPI over a year to September 2021. On the point he makes, I will come on in more detail to explain the smoothing effect, which he is well aware of, given his experience in the House. We will come to that point and see what he has to say at the end.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): We are well aware that over the weekend the chief executive of Tesco was on the TV, and has been in the papers today, saying that the price of food will increase by another 5%. We are in incredibly difficult times that we have not been in before, at least not that I can remember in my lifetime. Given that and what the right hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) is referring to, can consideration be given in this legislation to these abnormal price increases?

David Rutley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He will have seen the Chancellor set out last week a three-part plan to deal with rising energy prices. Of course the Government are watching the situation,

but, as we will discuss, there is more than just the uprating legislation being put in place to help people through these challenging times.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Does the Minister accept that, for people with the least who have to get through next winter, it is hard to defend using an inflation rate from before this winter? Before we get to that point next year, will he have a look at why we must use the September base point? We must have the three weeks of December data showing a 4.8% rise in inflation, which would at least help get the systems working in time for April.

David Rutley: That is a thoughtful point from my hon. Friend who is an expert on these matters, but he will be aware that there are practical reasons, as well as data-driven reasons, why we use the September data; we are then able to put these uprated changes through the system in time for April. The pandemic has been a very difficult time for many. The welfare system, particularly universal credit, has proved incredibly agile in response to the pandemic, and we have made unprecedented changes to the system to help people when they need it most. Indeed, since the start of the pandemic—*[Interruption.]* I am hearing a lot of chuntering from the shadow Secretary of State, but what I am trying to say is that DWP staff have done a fantastic job in response to a huge uplift in the number of people who need universal credit. Those are the people I am keen to praise in this debate, so I hope the right hon. Gentleman was talking about them with his colleague.

Jonathan Ashworth: Will the Minister give way?

David Rutley: No, I will make some progress. If there is chuntering involved about DWP, I want to get it on record that we have an enormous number of people—more than 90,000—who are committed to moving forward and helping to support people.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Will the Minister allow me to chunter on that?

David Rutley: No, I will make some progress. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will chunter later, and I will look forward to that.

Since the start of the pandemic, the Government have assisted the country, its people and its businesses with more than £400 billion in support. Since 2011, the Secretary of State has used the consumer prices index for the year to September as the measure for price inflation in her annual statutory review of benefit rates. The Bank of England forecasts that CPI will reach 7% in spring, before falling to 5.2% in quarter 1 next year and returning to a more historically normal level of 2.1% by the beginning of 2024. CPI will be the measure used in the Secretary of State's application of the triple lock, which will mean that the new and basic state pensions increase by the highest of earnings growth in the year to May and July 2022, CPI in the year to September 2022 or 2.5%.

Using the same period for CPI each year—I think this is the point that the right hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) was making, and I am keen to get to his point—means that the peaks and troughs

[David Rutley]

are evened out over time. Around half the time, CPI in the year to April is lower than it is in the year to the preceding September, and around half the time it is higher, so there is a smoothing effect. I understand the point that he makes.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): The Minister is making an interesting point. He talks about peaks and troughs and smoothing, but inflation is going in only one direction. At the end of this process, will people who are dependent on benefits be worse off or better off? It looks to me as though they are going to have a tough time on top of an already tough time.

David Rutley: We recognise that these are challenging times, and that is why, as I said to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the Chancellor set out last week what we are doing to support vulnerable people with the rising costs of energy. We are taking steps to recognise and lean into the peaks in the inflationary pressures that we are seeing not just in the UK, but globally. We recognise the impact that global increases in energy prices are having on household finances. As the Chancellor announced recently, from 1 April the energy price cap will rise from £1,277 to £1,971—an increase of almost £700 in energy bills for the average household. We are introducing crucial and timely measures to help with the increased costs, as part of a comprehensive package of support worth £9.1 billion in 2022-23.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): More than 30 leading anti-poverty groups, including the Child Poverty Action Group, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Trussell Trust, have warned that this motion will drive the most vulnerable deeper into poverty and misery, and they call on the Government instead to uplift benefits by 6%. Does the Minister accept that that needs to happen?

David Rutley: As I have been setting out in my opening remarks, we are taking forward this step in combination with a raft of other measures to help residents in this country face the challenges ahead. In fact, as part of the three-point plan, we have a £200 discount on energy bills this autumn for domestic electricity customers in Great Britain that will be repaid automatically over the next five years. There is a £150 non-repayable rebate on council tax bills for households in bands A to D in England; that is 80% of households. Of course, there is £144 million of discretionary funding for local authorities to support households who need support but are not eligible for the council tax rebate.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

David Rutley: I have given way enough for now—*[Interruption.]* I am about to make a point. The devolved Administrations are receiving around £715 million in funding through the Barnett formula in the usual way. That support is on top of an existing package of measures. The winter fuel payments will be made to 11 million pensioners this winter, ensuring that older people have the security and dignity that they deserve. Cold weather payments of £25 a week help people in receipt of certain income-related benefits to meet the additional

costs of heating during periods of unseasonable severe cold weather, and we plan to extend the warm home discount until 2026 and, from 2022-23 onwards, expand that scheme, increasing the value of the rebates from £140 to £150 to help an extra 780,000 pensioners and low-income families with their energy bills.

Alan Brown: The Minister has spoken about the Barnett consequential. Is it correct that the Scottish Government are getting only £220 million in Barnett consequential from the new measures announced—the £150 rebate—which does not compare very well with the £3 billion in additional oil and gas revenues that this Government are getting over this year and next year, or the £6 billion over the lifetime of the Parliament? Surely, much more could be done to help people right across the UK with the increased money the Treasury is bringing in.

David Rutley: As I have said, I think that a sum of the order of £715 million will be given to the Scottish Government in this particular measure.

David Linden: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Minister may have inadvertently misled the House in saying that that sum was for the Scottish Government, rather than the devolved Administrations. I am sure he will want to correct that at the Dispatch Box.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Let me deal with the point of order. I do not really like points of order in the middle of debates, because the hon. Gentleman would have had the chance to respond. However, the Minister has heard what he has said, and I am sure that if there is anything further he wants to add, he will do so.

David Rutley: I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will lean into the point that the hon. Member has made. To be clear, the devolved Administrations are receiving £715 million in funding through the Barnett formula as usual, so I think we are all clear, and I will proceed. I was just moving on to the state pension age.

For people who are in work and who are parents, or who are below the state pension age and are looking for work or unable to work, this order increases the personal standard allowances—jobseeker's allowance, employment support allowance, income support and universal credit—by 3.1%. Certain elements linked to tax credits and child benefit will be increased in line with those payments. The order also increases statutory payments by 3.1%: these include statutory adoption pay, statutory maternity pay, statutory paternity pay, statutory shared parental pay and statutory sick pay. The monthly amounts of universal credit work allowances will increase in April to £344 and £573.

As we begin our recovery and the global economy rebounds, consumer demand is surging at the same time as global supply chains are being disrupted. We recognise and understand the pressures that those rising costs are putting on household finances. Our long-term ambition is to support economic recovery across the UK, including through our multibillion-pound plan for jobs, which has been expanded by £500 million and will help people across the UK find work and boost their wages and prospects, particularly at a time of record vacancies,

which now stand at around 1.25 million. To help that effort, we have introduced the Way to Work, which is a concerted drive across the UK to help half a million people who are currently out of work into jobs over the next five months by engaging with employers and with claimants. This will help reduce the time that claimants spend out of work, thus preventing them from moving further away from the labour market, a factor that makes it increasingly difficult to get a job. To help working people further, as well as raising the national living wage to £9.50 from April—a pay rise for the lowest earners—we have reduced the universal credit taper from 63% to 55% and increased work allowances, with the result that nearly 2 million households will, on average, keep around an extra £1,000 on an annual basis.

The Government recognise the vital role that unpaid carers play each day and the additional challenges they have faced during the pandemic. From April, carer's allowance will increase to £69.70 a week. Unpaid carers also have access to support through universal credit, pension credit and housing benefit, all of which include additional amounts for carers. For a single person, the carer's element in universal credit will increase to £168.81 a month from April, and the carer's amount in pension credit and housing benefit will increase to £38.85 a week. These amounts recognise the additional contribution and responsibilities associated with caring for those on lower incomes. Benefits for those who have additional costs as a result of disability or health conditions will also increase by 3.1%. These include disability living allowance, attendance allowance, incapacity benefit, personal independent payment and other means-tested benefits, the employment and support allowance support group component and the limited capability for work and work-related activity element of universal credit.

Since the start of the pandemic, this Government have introduced measures to support the most vulnerable when needed. For example, since last November we have provided a £500 million support fund to help eligible households with essentials. The household support fund provides £421 million to help people in England with the cost of food, utilities and wider essentials, and we will continue to keep policies under review this year, basing interventions on the latest economic picture.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Can the Minister say, either now or in a written statement, how many overseas pensions will be increased and how many will not, and whether his Department will talk to the Treasury about including the excluded?

David Rutley: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion on this front, but all we are doing on these particular pensions is following a well-worn line in Government policy over many years.

Alan Brown: Will the Minister give way?

David Rutley: No, I have given way enough on these points, and I want to get on to pensioners more generally, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind.

The UK Government increased funding for the devolved Administrations on the household support elements accordingly, with an extra £41 million for the Scottish Government, £25 million for the Welsh Government and £14 million for the Northern Ireland Executive.

The state pension is the foundation of support for older people. With this order, the basic state pension will rise to £141.85 per week for a single person. This means that the full yearly basic state pension will increase to £2,300 a year higher in cash terms than in April 2010. The full rate of the new state pension will increase to £185.15 a week. Additional state pensions, as well as protected payments in the new state pension, will rise by 3.1%. This increase means that over the two years of the pandemic the basic and new state pensions will have increased by 5.6%, while CPI, in the two years to September 2021, was 3.6%. Finally, the pension credit standard minimum guarantee for a single pensioner will increase to £182.60 a week, and the rate for a couple will rise to £278.70 a week.

The Government are committed to ensuring that people have security and dignity in retirement. In 2020, when average earnings declined, the new and basic state pensions would have frozen, had the Government not introduced the Social Security (Up-rating of Benefits) Act 2020. Instead, those pensions increased by 2.5%, despite CPI being 0.5%. This provided extra financial stability for pensioners during a difficult time. After two unique years of troughs and peaks in earnings growth due to the pandemic, the Government took action to protect pensioners and taxpayers by smoothing the increases to these pensions. The Government remain committed to implementing the triple lock in the usual way for the remainder of the Parliament.

The Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order is an annual provision that affords a degree of inflation protection for the guaranteed minimum pension part of the occupational pension that was built up between 1988 and 1997. The guaranteed minimum pension that is in payment must be increased in line with the general level of prices or 3%, whichever is less. The relevant comparator is the consumer prices index for the year to September 2021, which was 3.1%. This order therefore specifies that the rate of guaranteed minimum pensions is to be increased by 3%, in line with primary legislation. These orders provide protection for pensioners and people in receipt of state benefits, and I commend them to the House.

5.19 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I join the Minister in thanking all the staff in the Department for Work and Pensions who, year in and year out, do so much to serve people on lower incomes. I can certainly speak from experience of my own caseload, as I know that individual staff in jobcentres and in the various call centres go out of their way to be of as much assistance as possible, particularly over the past two years. That needs to be recognised.

With each passing day we see more evidence of real hardship as the cost of living rises, and that hardship is experienced most by those on the lowest incomes. At the sharpest end, our food banks operated by the Trussell Trust and the Independent Food Aid Network are a stark measure of destitution, but all those on lower incomes are struggling—whether pensioners, working families, working people, carers or those permanently or temporarily unable to work due to sickness or disability—and the prospect of the coming months is filling people with fear.

[Ms Karen Buck]

All the organisations that work with those pensioners and working-age people, from Citizens Advice to the Child Poverty Action Group and many others, will report what is happening at the sharp end of their services as people are increasingly seeking assistance for help with debt and being driven into physical and mental hardship as a result of the financial situation that they find themselves in. This is not an abstract or statistical phenomenon; it is a reality of people in desperation.

The Secretary of State's statement announcing a 3.1% rise in pensions and most but not all benefits for April 2022 was originally laid on 25 November, when the severity of the cost of living crisis that we are now facing was not fully apparent. We now know that by December annual inflation had already risen to 5.4%, and the Bank of England is forecasting inflation to peak at 7.25% in April this year. We have not seen a cost of living rise of this scale for over 30 years. The result is that in April pensions and benefits will be uprated by less than half of the annual increase in inflation. This shortfall between benefits uprating and actual inflation reflects the traditional lag between the data used for uprating and its coming into effect, as we have already heard.

However, what I do not understand is that in a system that is increasingly, in the digital age, being billed as flexible and responsive, we are unable to ensure that in the exceptional circumstances that we now face there is not greater responsiveness to the kind of shift that has left people exposed to rising bills. The Minister referred to there being a practical problem in being able to respond to the sharp change in circumstances we have seen over recent months, but he did not spell out what those practical limitations are and why, 12 years into a Conservative Government, it has been impossible to be more responsive to them.

The measures that the Government have put forward, as outlined by the Minister, fall far short in addressing the inflationary shock that households are now facing. The Government have opted for a "Buy now, pay later" scheme which means that, in order to avoid taxing the super-profits of the energy companies, customers will have to pay a forced levy for the next four years, while at the same time allocating targeted support according to 30-year-old property values.

The latter scheme means that some of the poorest households, pensioners and families with children are excluded from help if, for example, they happen to live in a housing association property built 20 years ago which, by virtue simply of being slightly newer, falls within a higher council tax band. We are allocating assistance on the basis of decades-old estimates of property values while ignoring the reality of data we happen to hold on the locations and identities of those in the lowest income bands. This also continues the recent trend of funding schemes through local councils that are not only much more unwieldy to administer but replace entitlement with discretion and easily risk missing out those most in need. That is true of the hardship fund, it has been true of discretionary housing payments, and it is now also true of the council tax scheme that the Government are seeking to adopt.

In contrast, we have put forward plans that will offset the energy price shock for low to middle-income families without requiring them to pay the energy companies back. This would be worth £600 to households on lower incomes, with a cut in VAT and an extended and increased warm home discount would be sufficient to provide a £400 warm home discount to 9.3 million households who would be entitled to receive it. Households that would be newly eligible include all working families with children that are claiming universal credit—currently, only those with incomes below £16,000 are entitled. In addition, our plan would extend eligibility to nearly a quarter of a million pensioners in the savings credit group.

We must also recognise the permanent impact of decisions on benefit uprating over the years, which are a contributing factor to the cost of living crisis. The crisis did not emerge fully formed in the last three or four months. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) will say more about the specific issue of pensions later, which was debated in the legislation that suspended the triple lock, but I will talk about working-age benefits.

Apart from the benefits for which inflation uprating is fixed in statute, the uprating of working-age benefits, how they are uprated and whether they are uprated at all has been subject to an anarchic approach over recent years, driven by short-term political calculations of Ministers and Chancellors that have long-term consequences. Since 2010, the only consistency we have seen is that the departure from normal annual uprating with inflation has been in one direction only: downward, with rises capped at arbitrary rates or simply frozen.

To fully catalogue all the freezes and caps that have been introduced since 2010 would keep us here all evening. Fortunately, the Department's recently published abstract of benefit rate statistics summarises the impact of the main DWP benefits. Between April 2010 and last April, the real-terms value in 2021 prices of child benefit fell by 16% and the real-terms value of jobseeker's allowance and employment and support allowance fell by 8%. Remarkably, looking at the data for jobseeker's allowance and its predecessor, the real-terms value is now 10% lower than it was in 1965. Meanwhile, the real value of the universal credit standard allowance for a single person over 25 fell from £348 per month in 2013 to £324 per month in 2021 after the removal of the £20 uplift—a fall of 7%.

Those uprating choices have had permanent effects on benefit adequacy that are not reversed when benefit freezes come to an end. Policy choices since 2010 have ensured that families today are in a much weaker position to deal with a period of rapidly rising inflation than they would have been otherwise. We have come into the crisis with child and pensioner poverty rising, families already experiencing fuel stress and destitution rising. As last month's Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust report stated:

"Broadly speaking, there seems little prospect of reversing the trends since around 2012/13 of rising child poverty (which rose by four percentage points to almost a third of children by 2019/20) and rising pensioner poverty (which has risen by five percentage points to almost a fifth of pensioners by 2019/20)".

The cost of living crisis for low to middle-income households did not start with a surge in energy prices; it has been building for years.

Apart from the permanent effect of the policies enforced between 2010 and 2020, the order also enshrines a continuation of the freeze of local housing allowance rates. The uprating statement made a rather pathetic attempt to claim that the Government had decided to maintain LHA levels at the elevated cash rates agreed for 2020-21, as if the default position would have been to reduce them in cash terms. Let us be clear: the Government have decided to freeze housing allowance rates for the second year in a row. That is a policy choice, so Ministers should own up to it.

What the Secretary of State refers to as the elevated cash terms of 2021 was simply the policy of setting the housing allowance at the 30th percentile of the rental market. We know what happens when the local housing allowance is allowed to fall away from rent inflation, because we have been here before. Before the pandemic forced the Government's hand, the housing allowance, like other benefits, had been frozen for four years following years of below-inflation uprating. But of course, rents were not frozen.

By 2019, the average shortfall between the housing allowance and rent for a two-bedroom house was £1,250—equivalent to 7% of the total income of a typical renting universal credit family. According to the Office for National Statistics' experimental data on rental prices, rents rose by 3% just between February 2020 and December 2021. For many households, that rise alone is enough to cancel out the effect of the Government's much-vaunted £150 council tax rebate.

I have, then, another question for the Minister to answer when he responds to the debate: what is the Government's policy on the setting of housing allowances? Is it to give the lowest-income families access to the bottom 30% of the local private rented sector? Is it that housing allowances should fall in cash terms every year unless the Government decide otherwise? Or is it simply down to the whim of whatever the Chancellor of the Exchequer happens to decide? Housing allowances have real-world impacts: they affect people's ability to secure somewhere to live and to face a shortfall between the rent they actually pay and the income available to them, and, as in so many aspects of benefits policy, they feed into the work of other Government Departments, particularly in respect of rising homelessness.

Finally, it is important not to forget the effect of the limits and caps on benefits that hit living standards in unpredictable and arbitrary ways. Those limits and caps include the bedroom tax, the two-child limit and the benefit cap, the latter of which has not been updated since 2016. The rationale for the cap was purportedly to limit benefits to the same amount as the average incomes of working families. That rationale was always a sleight of hand, but surely even those who accept it have to ask why its value should be fixed at 2016 levels.

We see again the same pattern that has been a hallmark of uprating decisions since 2010: anarchic policy making and indifference to the living-cost pressures faced by people in ordinary households who need to rely on social security benefits. Working people, retired people and people with families are all categories of people on lower incomes. The cost of living crisis is upon us now; the time to act is now. We need to supplement this year's uprating with a targeted package of support that

offers real help to people who are struggling. That is what the Government should do and that is what Labour would do.

5.31 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Although it is necessary to approve the orders before the House, this debate also provides the opportunity for us to highlight the serious challenges that currently face the most vulnerable in society as a result of inflation rising to levels we have not seen for decades.

Back in September, there was a recognition that the consumer prices index would probably rise above 3.1%, but not that it would rise to 5.4% in three months or to the 7% currently predicted and that may be reached in the next few months. At that time, there was probably a consensus view that the significant rise in earnings, of the order of 8%, was an anomaly resulting from the reopening of the economy and the relaxing of covid restrictions. Set in that context, one could understand why it was financially prudent to suspend the triple lock for one year. Five months on, it appears not to be an anomaly and not to be a one-off.

I recognise the measures in place to support the poorest pensioners that my hon. Friend the Minister outlined, but the Government must be prepared to provide more targeted assistance. Back in September, I supported the retention of the £20 universal credit uplift. I feared that covid would have a long and vicious tail and was concerned that the withdrawal of the uplift would hit a lot of people very hard. Subsequent events have shown that the uplift should have been retained. Universal credit has the advantage that its infrastructure is in place and up and running, and that it is targeted at the poorest and helps people to stay afloat and not spiral into destitution.

In the context of the annual uprating of universal credit having been frozen for four years prior to the pandemic, the increase before us is helpful, but it neither makes up for the ground lost in the past nor provides adequate support for the most vulnerable in the immediate future. Again, I recognise the other support measures that the Government have introduced—including the increase in the UC taper rate, the increase in the work allowance and the household support fund—but the cost of living crisis is currently the most serious challenge the UK faces and the Government must do more in terms of targeted assistance to protect those for whom the most immediate outlook is bleak. In that context, I welcome the Minister's assurance that the Government are keeping the situation under close review. Last week's announcements were welcome, but I sense that they were too broad and too shallow, and that more deep and carefully directed support will be required.

5.34 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure, as always, to follow the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) who, unlike most of his colleagues, makes quite a thoughtful contribution that is perhaps just slightly more in touch with what is happening on the ground in our constituencies.

Not to diverge from that moment of conciliation, I too pay tribute to our work coaches, as the shadow Minister—the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck)—and the Minister did. I am looking forward

[David Linden]

to yet another visit to Shettleston jobcentre in my constituency—I actually used to have more jobcentres in my constituency, but the UK Government in their infinite wisdom decided to shut three out of four jobcentres in Glasgow a few years ago. Although I have massive ideological differences with the Department for Work and Pensions, I have nothing but respect for the work coaches at the jobcentres, who do a phenomenal job, albeit implementing policy from Whitehall with which I profoundly disagree.

If a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, it is fair to say that our social security safety net is our society's weakest link. We are debating the annual uprating orders against the unique backdrop of an ever-worsening cost of living crisis, with the very poorest in our constituencies consistently left behind by a Tory Government who are not focused on doing their day job. The cost of living crisis comes on the back of universal credit being slashed by £20 a week, which was the single biggest cut to social security since the formation of the modern welfare state. Those of us who do not sit in Caxton House's ivory towers can see that millions of our fellow citizens are facing real hardship right now. The British Government must urgently reverse their universal credit cut and instead introduce an emergency package to support families and boost incomes.

Our economy has not recovered to where it was pre pandemic, yet we have soaring inflation on a scale not seen for decades, which shows no sign of going away any time soon. Consumer prices were 5.4% higher in December 2021 than they were a year before—the highest inflation rate in almost 30 years. In mid-December the Bank of England forecast that the CPI inflation rate would remain at around 5% over winter, before rising to 6% in April 2022. However, based on last week's forecasts from the Bank of England, we can now safely expect inflation to rise to over 7% in just a couple of months. The rise in CPI inflation coincides with the perfect storm of a significant rise in energy bills, by 54%, to an average of £1,971 from April. Then we have to add to the mix the Tories' regressive and deeply unpopular national insurance hike, which will clobber the very youngest and the lowest earners in the country.

It is not just the Opposition, and indeed the SNP, that are raising the alarm about the cost of living crisis. New analysis from Citizens Advice Scotland found that an estimated 640,000 people—around one in seven—are finding their household energy bills unaffordable due to low incomes, with the figure set to increase due to the energy price hike. Yes, I acknowledge that the autumn Budget made some modest adjustments to the taper rate for universal credit, but only for those who are in work. For context, that actually impacts only four in every 10 universal credit claimants.

Analysis from the House of Commons Library shows that over 340,000 households in Scotland are directly affected by the £20 a week cut to universal credit, with incomes slashed by £1,040 per year. To help the Minister understand, that is £1,040 a year less for people to spend in our communities on gas, electricity and the weekly food shop. I can tell the Minister that my low-income constituents in Parkhead, as I suspect is also the case for his in Macclesfield, will not be finding that extra £1,000 in their savings, because many of our constituents

live month to month and hand to mouth. Instead, the Minister's constituents, like mine, will be going without food or heat just to try to keep their heads above water this winter. That is why charities such as the respected Trussell Trust, whose food banks are in increased demand, want the Government to reinstate that £20 cut from universal credit. They want to stop families "spiralling into destitution" with steeply rising costs for heating and food.

Besides reversing cuts to universal credit, the British Government must urgently deliver a financial package to help families by delivering a low-income energy payment, matching the Scottish child payment UK-wide, introducing a real living wage and increasing statutory sick pay in line with a real living wage.

Andy McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent contribution. Universal credit was uplifted in response to the covid crisis. The situation for the poorest in our society has not improved over this period, and in fact, going into this cost of living crisis, it is getting worse and worse. Does he therefore agree that it is a completely unsustainable position to remove that £20 uplift in universal credit, and that the correct response, among the many responses, should be to restore that with immediate effect?

David Linden: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I think we all welcomed the increase to universal credit at the beginning of the pandemic, but it was a clear admission by the UK Government that social security was inadequate in its current form. A lot of people were plunged into using universal credit, perhaps for the first time, and it was their only interaction with the social security system. Lo and behold, many of those people using the social security system for the first time ever realised that a lot of the stereotypes and nonsense that comes out of Whitehall about a life on benefits somehow being luxurious and about lying around watching "The Jeremy Kyle Show" were not actually the case, and that the social security system was so poor. It is only a suspicion of mine, but I think that is why Ministers at the time decided to put that £20 in place. I say to the hon. Gentleman and the Minister that if the Government could concede in March 2020 that universal credit was inadequate, surely they have to understand that it is inadequate now.

The other point that I am sure the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) would have made is that the uplift was not extended to those on legacy benefits. People in receipt of legacy benefits had increased costs as a result of the pandemic and having a disability. Some 2.5 million people in these islands were denied that £20 uplift by the Government. That is subject to action in the High Court, and the Government would have done well to realise that they should not have had to be taken to a legal court on that, and that the policy was morally wrong in the court of public opinion.

The orders before the House do not do any of the things I have suggested need to be done in reforming social security, and it cannot always be left to the devolved Governments of these islands to try to alleviate bad social security policy from a heartless and callous Westminster Government for which Scotland did not vote. Indeed, we have not voted for a Conservative Government since the 1950s. While the SNP is doubling

the Scottish child payment in April, the Tories at Westminster have cut £20 a week in universal credit from some of the very same families, knowingly pushing thousands of families into poverty.

Scotland's SNP Government are already spending £71 million to mitigate in full the bedroom tax and an additional £10.9 million to mitigate other welfare cuts, including the benefit cap and changes to local housing allowance rates. As the former UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, pointed out,

"mitigation comes at a price and is not sustainable."

I guess the question I would pose not just to the Government, but to all parties in the House, is this: is the sum total of their ambition for devolution simply to be a sticking plaster for Westminster's ever-weakening social security net?

Far too many households have been left behind and will not benefit from this uprating, because the Tories are refusing to fix known policy failures. It is not just universal credit that needs fixing. When it comes to the benefit cap, thousands of households have seen their incomes hit hard because the Government have refused to extend the grace period that gives claimants nine months' exemption from the benefit cap. As the Poverty Alliance points out, how the benefit cap is designed means that those who require the highest level of support from the benefit system are the most likely to be affected. That is simply unjust and it is having a brutal and real impact on low-income families.

Based on the DWP's latest figures, 180,000 households have had their benefits capped, including more than 6,400 households in Scotland. The benefit cap disproportionately impacts lone-parent families—the majority of whom are women—as well as larger families and black and minority ethnic families.

While we are at it, we need to address the two-child limit and the associated rape clause. Quite simply, thousands of families with children are being pushed into poverty because the British Government refuse to scrap the two-child limit on child tax credit and universal credit. I do not know how the two-child limit and the associated rape clause ever got past the Government's family test, but I am sure the Minister will reflect on that in his winding-up speech.

Research by the Child Poverty Action Group shows that the majority of those affected by the two-child limit are families with three children and, indeed, the majority are working families. In April last year, 1.1 million children were affected by the two-child limit—237,000 more than the previous year. That number will continue to grow, as nearly all low-income families with three or more children eventually become subject to the limit.

The five-week wait for the first payment is also needlessly pushing people into hardship. That could be easily fixed by implementing our proposal to turn advance payment loans into non-repayable grants after the claimant is deemed eligible.

I will turn to sanctions, because far too many households face destitution because DWP rules push them into debt through sanctions and deductions. The Minister will recall that last week I tagged him in a tweet about the fact that it took his Department 151 days to reply to my letter about a constituency case. If the DWP can sanction my constituents for failure to attend a jobcentre

or for turning up late, I wonder whether we would do well to sanction the Minister for not keeping up with his correspondence pile or for failing to reply to Members of this House. I am reminded of the old saying that what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

The SNP has long called for the UK Government to fix these utterly fundamental flaws in the UK's social security system. We need to deliver a system that actively tackles poverty and inequality, and that empowers people. Put bluntly, Scotland's Government, though they wish to, cannot change these policies, as 85% of welfare expenditure and income replacement benefits remain reserved to this place and to UK Ministers. That includes universal credit, which is a reserved benefit.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) will touch on the pensions aspects of the orders, so I will draw my remarks to a close with what is becoming an annual comment from me on uprating. The Westminster austerity agenda continues to punish and to make life a misery for some of the most vulnerable people in all our constituencies. I know that the orders we are debating tonight are an annual formality for the House, but so long as Scotland remains bound to Westminster, I and my party will always speak up for the most vulnerable and make the case for a decent, robust and generous social security system. There is no escaping the fact that, until Scotland is independent, we are forced to accept the majority of social security policy from a Westminster Government we did not vote for and whose support can, at best, be described as meagre.

5.47 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I think the Minister will find that he has managed to unite the whole House and every speaker in this debate. Sadly for him, he will find that every speaker, including me, thinks that the rise we will vote through tonight is not sufficient for the situation we find ourselves in. We will all ask the Government to go away and try to find some more.

We should be aware of the logic behind what we are doing. We are trying to give the people on the least—those who are out of work, those who cannot work, and those who have retired and therefore no longer work—sufficient money to pay all their bills. Unless we believe that people's benefits are way higher than what they need, if we do not give them an inflationary increase every year, by definition they cannot possibly pay next year for all the things they had last year.

In this pretty unique situation of the rising cost of living, we are asking those with the least to get themselves not only through this winter, but through all of next year and all of next winter, based on an inflation measure that was taken before this winter. What they have to pay their energy bills in March 2023 will be based on a calculation of what was needed in September 2021. That surely cannot be right or logical. When bills are rising as sharply as they are, I cannot see how it is physically possible for people to do that.

Sadly, it does not look likely that we will be sat here in a year's time with it all having reversed and with the gas price back to where it was a year ago. It does not look like a temporary blip; it looks like some of these prices will be baked in for a long time. There is sufficient uncertainty out there that there could be further challenges to come. I urge the Government to have a long, hard

[*Nigel Mills*]

look at whether we really ought to have this system and whether we cannot do better than using the September inflation figure to set the benefits and pension rise six months later.

At the start of the pandemic, the Government rightly chose to introduce the £20 uplift in universal credit. We managed to get that done in a matter of days. Last November, at the Chancellor's financial statement, the reduction in the taper rate was announced and the Government managed to get that into force in a matter of days—on 1 December. Yet now we are told that they have to use the September inflation figure and cannot use a later one, even though we had the December figure in the middle of January, about three weeks ago, and three whole months before the rise comes into force.

I accept that some of the older, clunkier benefits—those whose systems are based on steam-driven 1980s IT that seems to work by shoving KitKat wrappers into the fuse box to patch it—may take a bit longer to programme. However, I would hope that for universal credit and the state pension—the two largest ones and the ones that affect the most people—we could take a more up-to-date figure. That would not fix the situation and wholly resolve the fact that inflation will be at 6% or 7%, but at least people would have got a 4.8% rise based on the December CPI rate rather than 3.1%. That would have been of help.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): The hon. Gentleman speaks with great authority on all these issues. I have been in the House for over a decade, and it is always a pleasure to listen to him on economic matters. In his view, is anything stopping the Chancellor from making a statement in his March Budget to reflect the cost of living and address some of the issues raised in the debate?

Nigel Mills: No, I think the Chancellor could do that at any point and, as I said, he can make changes to the biggest benefit system quite quickly if he sees the need to.

The case that I am trying to make to the Minister is that, at times, the Government can act much faster. I accept that huge investment in IT for legacy benefits that we are phasing out may not be effective, but I would have thought that, in the modern world, with the more modern systems, we could move on from basing the April rise on the inflation position six months earlier. I hope that the Government can find a way to base the rise at least on the December measure, so it is only three months out of date. I accept that for most years that would not make much difference, and for some years it could actually mean a slightly lower rise than using the September figure, but at least that would give us the best possible protection against this awful situation. Inflation is already much higher than it was at the reference point, and it will be even higher still by the time these amounts are paid.

I fear that the position is even worse than that at which I started—that of believing that benefits are in the right place and therefore an inflationary rise is needed. I genuinely fear that many of the benefits we have are now lower than people need, so a lower than inflation rise for benefits that are already too low leaves people in an impossible position. That is why I supported retaining the £20 uplift in universal credit.

I have told the Government many times that, if they believe that all these benefits are sufficient for the standard of living that we want people to have, they should do and publish an assessment of the basket of things that people have to buy and prove they can afford to buy them all. I would then happily support them. If such an assessment showed that benefits were too high, we could have a debate, but it is incredibly unlikely that it would show that. It is overwhelmingly likely that it would show that the measures that were necessary over the last 10 years have ended up going too far and that we are not giving people enough for the decent standard of living they ought to have. If that is so, we need to fix them. I challenge the Government to publish that assessment over the next year and prove their case that benefits are okay. Let us then get the inflationary increase done right. We cannot keep having this same debate in which many of us think that benefits are not in the right place and yet we cannot prove it because that is for the Government to do and, for some reason, they do not want to.

Andy McDonald: The hon. Member is making an excellent point about the assessment that would be needed. Does he think that, in an assessment of adequacy, it would be relevant to factor in the consequences of underpayment in terms of monetising demand on other services that people go to? There is a cost to poverty and usually it is extraordinarily expensive not just for the person suffering from it but in regard to the demand on other governmental services.

Nigel Mills: I absolutely agree that asking people to live without enough money to heat their houses and to eat creates all manner of knock-on consequences that will inevitably end up costing the taxpayer money in the long run. It should not be a big challenge or a contentious point of debate to want to ensure that the benefits we are giving the poorest in society are enough for them to live on, so I cannot see why we would not publish periodic analysis just to check that everything is in working order.

We should remember that many millions of people cannot go and get a different job or work a few extra hours to make up the difference. They cannot work, they are retired or they are not in work—they have no chance to earn an income, so what we give them is what they get, and we need to make sure that it is sufficient.

Alan Brown: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech and a very good point. Ministers sometimes concentrate too much on the number of job vacancies across the country, as if somehow they can all magically be filled, but the point is that not everybody can fill those jobs. There are demographics and geography at play—it is not as if people can just uproot themselves and move to get another low-paid job somewhere else. The Government really need a better understanding of where the vacancies are, with skills and training programmes targeted at filling vacancies in the long term.

Nigel Mills: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: we cannot expect somebody to move hundreds of miles in that situation. Equally, anybody who can work should work, and should be supported and given the training to do that when it is in their best interests. I do not meet many people who can work but do not want to; I think most people who can work with the right support are very keen to.

I will vote for the draft orders tonight. I think our choice is a 3% rise or nothing, so it seems slightly self-defeating to vote against them, but I ask the Government not to take the House's approval as a sign that it agrees with the position we are in. The Government could use their discretion and make the increase higher than inflation if they wanted to, just as they have chosen many times to make it lower than inflation. We knew that this problem was coming; it has not turned up in the last fortnight and got us chasing around.

I am not even asking for something that would be a long-term cost. All we would be doing is bringing forward to this year the rise we would give people next year, so that they have it in time to pay their higher bills, rather than six months after getting them. That is the impact of the calculation that we do, and if we do not get it right, we will be putting people in an impossible situation.

The idea of having a welfare system that we can control so we can give people transparency and up-front certainty is that it is there to give them the support they need. We cannot keep filling holes with discretionary, complicated schemes that people may or may not find out about, that are done differently by councils all around the country, and that may or may not exist in the long term. The whole idea of a universal credit system was that it would be a benefit that rolls everything into one and gives people the support they need. By doing all these occasional one-off top-up schemes, we are admitting that the main benefit is not in the right place.

I urge the Government to take a step back, to remember our core purpose of giving people enough to live on—not luxuriously or hugely generously, but with a decent standard of living—and to be absolutely sure that they have achieved that and are still achieving it. If they have any doubts, they must do the work to publish it and prove it, and if we need to fix it, let us get on with fixing it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions.

5.57 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), who makes an important contribution to the work of the Select Committee. I agree with much of what he says.

May I start by acknowledging—as the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), did at Question Time—the generous tribute that the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), gave in this House to our late colleague Jack Dromey? I often heard each of them privately singing the praises of the other when Jack was the Pensions Minister's shadow, perhaps particularly when they were both working on the plans from Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union for the combined defined contribution pension scheme that I think is due to be launched later this year. Jointly, they have set a great example to the House. I would be grateful if the Minister present communicated that point to his hon. Friend.

This is a very singular year for social security uprating. Households, as we have been reminded, are feeling acutely the pressures of rising food and energy prices.

From 2016 to 2020, as my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) pointed out, about half the benefits covered by the draft order were frozen. Benefit incomes became completely disconnected from the real cost of living. Last September, as we have been reminded, the temporary increase of £20 a week to universal credit and working tax credit ended. Last February, a year ago, the Select Committee unanimously called on the Chancellor to extend that increase for at least a year—that view has been expressed this afternoon by the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), too—but the call was rejected. For some people in work, the loss was mitigated, in part, by the welcome changes to work allowances and the universal credit taper rate, but others who are struggling with rapidly rising prices and with an income just from universal credit have a much lower income than a year ago.

The chief executive of the Resolution Foundation told the Treasury Committee a week ago that, taking into account the removal of the £20 a week uplift and the improvements to the taper rate and work allowances “around three quarters of Universal Credit claimants will lose out”.

The other quarter will have a higher income, but they “will probably have that all taken away from them in higher energy bills and in the national insurance rise...It will be particularly grim for those who did not benefit from the change because they are out of work or on very low earnings”.

Benefits are uprated each April in line with the CPI rate of the previous September, which this year is 3.1%, but, as we have been reminded, the Bank of England expects inflation to be over 7% by April. As the hon. Member for Waveney said, inflation will not be far short of the 8% by which pensions would have risen if the triple lock had been left in place last year.

Robert Joyce, the deputy director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, argues that increasing benefits each April based on inflation in the previous September—this point was powerfully made by the hon. Member for Amber Valley—is

“not fit for the period of high and rising inflation we now face...the poorest are heading for a 3% year-on-year cut in their real benefit levels and living standards.”

The Government's protocol on social research requires that commissioned social research should be published within 12 weeks of being received. The DWP refused to publish the NatCen report on disabled people's experience of the benefits system. Not only did they not publish it within 12 weeks; they did not publish it at all. That is completely in breach of the clear requirement of the Government's protocol on social research, which was adopted in 2015.

Instead the Work and Pensions Committee had to obtain the report and publish it, as we did last week. The report says that disabled people

“reported that they were often unable to meet essential day to day living costs”.

These include food, rent and heating. This 3% real-terms cut in their income will make it a great deal worse.

The IFS also points out that universal credit, as we saw in the pandemic—again, the hon. Member for Amber Valley made this point—can be changed at short notice and could be uprated at more recent inflation rates. I hope the Department will also reconsider our 2020 recommendation to

“increase the speed with which changes can be made to legacy benefit rates.”

[Stephen Timms]

At the start of the pandemic, local housing allowance was reset to the 30th percentile of local rents, but it has now been frozen again, as my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North said. In our report on the five-week wait for the first payment of universal credit, we recommended keeping it at the 30th percentile, with an annual review to keep rates appropriate for each area. That has not been done, which, as my hon. Friend said, will make things progressively harder for people who depend on the local housing allowance rate.

The standard minimum guarantee in pension credit will be increased by only 3.1%, but pension credit take-up remains low. On the most recent figures: six in 10 of those entitled to pension credit actually claimed it; 76% of the total amount of pension credit that could have been claimed was claimed; and up to £1.8 billion of pension credit was unclaimed. Independent Age, the charity, has called on the Government to research who is not claiming pension credit—I hope the Government will publish the research this time—and to draw up an ambitious plan for much higher take-up over five years. Researchers at Loughborough University found that maximising pension credit take-up could lift three in 10 pensioners out of poverty and reduce the number in severe poverty by half. In July I asked the Secretary of State whether the Department would bring forward an action plan. She replied:

“I am not anticipating a big action plan, no.”

Given that pensioners on low incomes are being particularly hard-hit by rising energy costs—as we will be reminded more and more frequently in the next few weeks—will the Minister reconsider?

The Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order gives pension schemes the percentage by which they need to uprate GMPs built up between 1988 and 1997. This year, as the Minister has explained, it is 3%. Some people with long periods of contracting out—and therefore large GMPs—lost out under the new state pension in 2016. The ombudsman concluded in August 2019 that

“when communicating this change, DWP did not explain that people with long periods of contracting out could be significantly worse off. It instead chose to focus only on the benefits of the new State Pension and other separate pension changes.”

It recommended that the DWP should

“review and report back its learning from our investigations...In particular, it should ensure that its literature clearly and appropriately points out that some individuals who have large GMPs and reach State Pension Age in the early years may be negatively affected by the changes. It should explicitly tell people to check their circumstances and should provide details to the public about how they can do this.”

In response—it responded rather reluctantly, but it did respond in the end—the Department produced a factsheet last August, entitled “Guaranteed Minimum Pension (GMP) and the effect of the new State Pension”. That falls a long way short of the Committee’s call in 2016 for the Government to

“focus on identifying the individuals affected, assessing their potential losses, and communicating with them”,

but at least it was something.

The Department said that it would review the factsheet after six months. The Committee wrote to the permanent secretary recently, setting out points that we would like to be covered in the review, including what steps had

been taken to promote the factsheet and how many people had contacted DWP as a result. In a response last month, the permanent secretary said that nobody had so far applied for compensation as a result of reading the factsheet, and that the Department had received only four letters in response to it.

I am puzzled by that, because I received two emails just last week about this very issue. Let me read one of them to the Minister:

“I had personally been searching unsuccessfully for the GMP factsheet for months on gov.uk using a range of search terms since you spoke in parliament about this issue in February 2021...How anyone affected was expected to know it was there I will never know. There was no press release or other publicity to encourage the large numbers of people affected to look at the gov.uk site factsheet.

I was shocked to read the factsheet. It completely failed to properly inform people about the Ombudsman’s ruling that there had been maladministration or that they could claim compensation.”

The other emailer complained that the information on his company pension scheme website was misleading: that it made no reference to the factsheet so he had no way of knowing about it, and it gave him no hint that he could apply for compensation. The fact that few people have referred to the factsheet may well mean that they do not know about it, and I hope that a serious effort will now be made to draw attention to it.

I very much welcome the debate we have had this afternoon about what is the appropriate level for increasing benefits at this very difficult time. Like others, I say to the Government. “You are going to have to go further.”

6.8 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I must be completely frank: I find it astonishing that these regulations will implement a whopping real-terms cut in some benefits and pensions, given that inflation is already 5.4% and the Bank of England forecast is for 7.25% in April 2022. Let me put it simply: the Government are knowingly—yes, knowingly—going to drive more and more families, children, pensioners, and some of the most vulnerable people in our society into desperation and poverty. A letter signed by the Child Poverty Action Group, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Trussell Trust and the End Child Poverty coalition, among others, states:

“There has long been a profound mismatch between what those with a low income have, and what they need to get by.”

In my constituency, which suffers from one of the highest rates of child poverty in the entire country, this mismatch comes as too many are already struggling to heat their homes or put food on the table. For example, 7,300 children in Poplar and Limehouse were in absolute poverty in 2019-20, which is 973 more than in 2014-15.

Astonishingly, these orders come just as we had last Thursday’s announcement of an increase in the energy price cap, signalling that a quarter of UK households will be pushed into fuel poverty. The impact of the cost of living crisis on people across the country is truly harrowing and it is a shameful indictment on any civilised society. Of course, this is set against the brutal backdrop of a decade of Conservative austerity. Across the UK there is a real sense of despair in workplaces, fuelled by desperate situations. As we speak, porters, security staff, catering, and reception staff, are on strike outside St Barts Hospital, and the Royal London and Whipps Cross,

fighting for the simple right to having a wage they can actually live on. This strike is a part of a growing wave of pay struggles, from bus drivers, airport ground crew, drivers, railway cleaners, warehouse workers and so on. These people worked hard during the pandemic to keep everything going and were placed at the greatest risk. They do not need lectures on exercising pay restraint, because they understand what pay restraint means, as they live it and breathe it. They are forced to see their families go without, despite their working long hours and in difficult situations. We must not stand by and watch people go under while this Government continue to both foster and scapegoat hardship, by continuing to pursue measures to arbitrarily limit welfare spending, as per the welfare cap, which was re-affirmed earlier this year.

A comprehensive rescue package is needed: winter fuel payments could be doubled; the £20 cut in universal credit be reinstated immediately; VAT on household bills could be scrapped; and energy companies could be taken into public ownership to ensure that rather than profits being siphoned off, money is spent on reducing bills for consumers. We must be very clear that those with the broadest shoulders and the deepest pockets must pay their fair share. Why should working people have to pay for the failures of the energy market and the total shambles of Government policy? The challenges we face today do not come out of the blue. There is a reason that a key component of Labour's 2019 manifesto was its green new deal, driven by public ownership of the energy sector and making sure we have value for money for the taxpayer. We have long needed systemic change. Clearly, the energy market does not work; it is not able or willing to deliver clean green energy at low prices for households. Public ownership of energy is common sense and evidence-based policy making. In the long run, it is the only way out of being held hostage by the oil and gas industry's profiteering and destruction of our planet.

It has long been time that people should be put first, ahead of ideological commitments to the market and a dogmatic opposition to public ownership. These orders are an attack on my constituents and their way of life, and I will oppose them with all my breath and strength, because, ultimately, cutting benefits and pensions today is a political choice. Fuel poverty is a political choice and hunger is a political choice, just as austerity has been, and is always going to be, a political choice. They are all choices to prioritise profit over people, made by a callous Government and inflicted brutally on our communities. They are all choices we must resist.

6.14 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow some excellent speeches, and to join colleagues from the Work and Pensions Committee in their sincere request that the Minister really looks in detail at the issues we have been describing. *[Interruption.]* I want to keep my mask on, if that is okay. As a former public health consultant, I want to practise the precautionary principle. When we take a mask off, we increase the risk of spreading what may be behind our masks. In the time I have, I want to focus on the context of why this issue is so important and why I urge the Minister to respond to those several requests to think in more detail not just about today's uprating order, but how we move forward in future.

The Office for Budget Responsibility estimated that over the last 12 years, 9% to 17% of working-age support for claimants has been cut. The Resolution Foundation put a figure on that of £34 billion a year. Although the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 had a number of different policy aspects, the arbitrary reduction and freezing of social security payments accounted for 6% to 8% of the cut in that support.

Several highly reputable think-tanks and the Equality and Human Rights Commission have identified the disproportional loss of income to low-income households, and the skewing and exacerbating of inequalities. The poorest 10% have lost 11% of their income, about £1,200 a year, and those with children about 20%, £4,000 a year. The EHRC showed that disabled people would be most disadvantaged, with a household with one disabled adult and a disabled child losing £3 in every £10, or £6,500 a year. The Disability Benefits Consortium is another organisation that has analysed the impact of social security cuts over the last 12 years, particularly on disabled people. The EHRC estimated the increase in poverty for children by 2021, as did the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. We are seeing their figures come true: six out of 10 households in poverty are working households.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation also identified that although physical disability rates have stayed the same over the last five years, the number of people with mental health conditions, while not receiving the same recognition, has increased. By 2017, an additional 1.6 million people with a severe mental health condition or learning disability were being plunged into poverty.

Importantly, the EHRC and the JRF also concluded that social security cuts are the key determinant of the increase in poverty and that our social security system no longer plays a part in protecting people from poverty and destitution. What a thing to say in the fifth-richest country in the world. From 2018 data, the UK's social security spending as a percentage of GDP was below both the EU27 and OECD average. On out-of-work support, even with the pandemic universal credit uplift of £20 a week, the UK still had the least generous support of the OECD. According to the IFS, unemployment support is 14% of average earnings, compared with 25% after the second world war. Many have spoken about the impact that is having on debt, fuel poverty, food poverty and so on. We must not forget that there has also been an impact on homelessness.

The increase in poverty and inequality has had an impact not only on levelling up but on our life expectancy and our healthy life expectancy. I read the White Paper somewhat in dismay when it was published last week, as it tried to say that it would make all the difference. Clearly, the Government have not grasped what has been going on over the last 12 years. As Professor Sir Michael Marmot said, it is an order of magnitude less than what needs to be considered to make a difference and address the inequalities our country is experiencing.

The estimated mortality rate of vulnerable social security claimants is three times that of the general population; that also needs to be considered. There is also evidence of the devastating causal impact of child poverty on infant mortality. A very good article in *The BMJ* a year or so ago managed to quantify that each 1% increase in child poverty was associated with

[Debbie Abrahams]

an extra six infant deaths per 100,000 live births, with about a third of the increase in infant mortality between 2014 and 2017 being attributed to the rise in child poverty.

There is also evidence that the unprecedented increase in infant mortality in England was not experienced evenly across the population. In the most deprived local authorities, the previously declining trend in infant mortality reversed and mortality rose, leading to an additional 24 infant deaths per 100,000 live births. I have been bandying about a lot of statistics; it is all sourced data, and I invite anybody who is interested to please contact me.

In February 2020, Michael Marmot published his 10-year review showing the declining value of social security and the lack of protection provided to the most financially vulnerable, which contributed to the decline in life expectancy. Rolling on to the pandemic, his review at the end of 2020 showed the UK's high and unequal covid death toll; in the first wave we had one of the worst death rates in Europe and the world. He showed that that was related to our structural inequality, to which social security cuts had contributed.

Other Members have mentioned the inflation rates we now face, and the 54% increase in the energy price cap coming in April; frankly, the measures that are proposed to combat that are ridiculous. I urge the Minister to take back the views from this House, including from his own Benches. Clearly, the measures are inadequate, and I urge him to think again.

6.22 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): It is important that the debate covers both orders—social security and pensions—because the issues, and the circumstances facing our constituents, are the same. As the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) said, if the orders are not approved, there will be no increase at all, but it is telling that he and the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) are the only Conservative Back Benchers to have spoken in this debate and they agree with Opposition Members that the Government's proposals in relation to the 3.1% increase are insufficient. It is interesting that no Back Benchers are willing to say that they support the Government; I can only assume that they are dealing with the same casework as I and other Opposition Members have received about the circumstances that people face. Inflation is exceeding all expectations, outstripping wages for those in work and impacting on the price of the essentials that we all need in our daily lives.

Earlier today I attended the Scottish Affairs Committee where we heard about access to cash, which is very important for rural communities such as mine and for vulnerable constituents. I visited virtually the access-to-cash hub pilot, whose staff described to me how people budget in pennies—pennies and pence. That is what we are talking about. The decisions that the Government are making in these orders will mean that those people will no longer be able to survive and will fall over a cliff edge.

Benefits are not keeping pace with the cost of living; let us look at disabled people. Much has been said of the universal credit cuts and failure to provide additional

support for those on legacy benefits, who are, disproportionately, disabled people. As I said in last week's disability Green Paper Westminster Hall debate, living costs are simply more expensive for those who are disabled or have a disabled child. Scope's data from 2019, before the pandemic, suggest that those costs equate to nearly £600 per month, and I would be interested to learn what that figure is now. Put simply, disabled people are more likely to be in energy poverty. They may need electronic devices to cope with their disability, they need increased heating if they have mobility issues, and specialist food plays a part as well. The Minister mentioned the extension of the warm home discount, but the consultation on that closed four months ago and I would be interested to hear when the result will be published.

On pensions, the position is straightforward. The Conservatives have chosen to break a 2019 manifesto commitment by scrapping the triple lock. Choosing to use the September CPI figure only, despite the fact that we knew at the time what inflation was going to look like—in fact, it is even worse than we were told it would be—is a retrograde step, and it means a £1 billion real-terms cut. A 1.1% uptick in just one month means that pensioners on the basic state pension will miss out on £80.60 next year, and those on the new state pension will miss out on £104. The total cost of uprating pensions and benefits by 6%—the Bank of England's previous estimate of the peak of inflation—would be £4.5 billion. Interestingly, a similar amount was recently written off to covid fraud.

Nobody is saying that the Government are totally responsible for the variety of systemic factors contributing to the increasing cost of living that we are experiencing, particularly those related to the pandemic. What Opposition Members—and indeed some Conservative Members—are saying is that the Government are failing to provide the support that is required. Given that we know what to expect, why are we not taking steps to ensure that benefits and pensions meet the increase in living costs? Anything else is a cut, which will impact on the most vulnerable the hardest. We will see this in our inboxes again. In order to get the Prime Minister out of his current hole, the Government will spend in excess of £10 million setting up an Office of the Prime Minister. People see those decisions and actions, and they will judge accordingly.

6.26 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I rise to express my grave concern at the likely impact of these orders on the living standards of millions of people up and down the country. The draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2022 sets the increase in social security payments at September's CPI rate of 3.1%, and the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2022 sets the guaranteed minimum pensions increase around 3%. Yet the Bank of England warned last week that households faced the worst squeeze on disposable incomes for 30 years, and predicted that CPI inflation for April 2022, when the uprating will come into effect, is likely to be 7.25%.

That squeeze on incomes has come about because decisions by successive Tory Governments, including this one, have driven more and more people into poverty and hardship—policies such as the introduction of the household benefit cap in 2013 and the overall welfare

cap in 2014. We have had freezes on child benefit and jobseeker's allowance, and more recently the appalling decision to cut back the £20-a-week universal credit uplift. We have also had many, many public sector pay freezes.

The cost of living crisis facing our country means that things are about to get much worse, with petrol, food and energy bills skyrocketing. New figures from the Office for National Statistics show that the poorest households are spending a third of their budgets on food and household bills, while the richest spend only a fifth of their money on those items. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has found that for single adult households on low incomes, their energy bills after April will rise a shocking 54%, which is an increase of 21 percentage points since 2019-20.

The reality for so many people, including my constituents, is far removed from the rhetoric of this Government, and the impact on people in my constituency of Cynon Valley will be devastating. I have spoken about this many times. Over a third of people in Cynon Valley are living in poverty, and in some areas 50%—yes, 50%—of children are living in poverty. That is well above the UK national average. Unemployment rates are very high, and we have the highest rate of economic inactivity in the whole country.

Before coming into this place, I worked for many years for Shelter Cymru, for Citizens Advice and with food banks, so I know the real cost of what lies behind these statistics and what families and pensioners face day in, day out.

We cannot forget the human stories behind these figures. I want to give one example that has stayed with me for many years. I will refer to them as Mr and Mrs Davies. They had been extremely well-off and had owned their own business, but they had hit hard times. They came to me for advice when I worked for the homelessness charity Shelter Cymru. They could not make ends meet and were at serious risk of losing their home. Finding themselves in this situation was a devastating shock for them and the paltry level of benefits meant that they could not make ends meet or pay their bills. This could happen to any one of us, including many on the Conservative Benches.

It is not as though the country cannot afford to provide for everyone. We are the fifth richest nation in the world. For instance, it has been estimated that reforming capital gains tax and taxing dividends regimes could raise an additional £19 billion a year, while a wealth tax could raise in excess of £260 billion a year. There has been £350 billion in tax avoidance since 2010. A one-off windfall tax on oil and gas profits, which we talked about last week, would put an extra £600 in the pockets of households on the lowest incomes, compared with the Conservatives' paltry £350.

But instead the Government continue to choose to punish the most vulnerable and those in need in our society. As others have said, this is a political choice. As usual with the Conservatives, their policies ensure that it is the poorest who pay the most while the gap between the poorest and the wealthiest continues to grow. These are families, pensioners and households who cannot afford to have their benefits cut again, but that is what is being proposed today—a 3% increase when costs are going up by 5%, 6% or 7%. This order is therefore a proposal to increase the level of poverty in this country.

That is why I am backing the JRF and other organisations such as CPAG and the Trussell Trust in calling for a larger increase of 6%. The Government must withdraw this order and come back urgently with a new offer that ensures that social security recipients are no longer scapegoated and exploited as they have been over the past 10 years by this Conservative Government.

6.32 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I resent the premise of this debate. I resent the Government bringing forward an unamendable order on such a significant issue, because that leads to the conclusion, as the hon. Members for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) and for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) said, that if we reject the order there will be no increase whatsoever. We should not allow Parliament to be blackmailed in that way. The response is fairly straightforward: on the issue of poverty in this country, there has to come a time when this House rises up. We have heard example after example. We can all give examples from our own constituencies—the heartbreaking stories of how people are suffering at the moment. So we should not accept the Government bringing forward an unamendable order and expecting us either to go through the Lobby like sheep and vote for it, or to abstain.

Andy McDonald: Does my right hon. Friend agree that this country is facing a crisis that is being visited on the poor, and that to put this House in the position of simply having to accept it is absolutely reprehensible? We should be demanding that this order be taken away and that we get a proper settlement and a proper increase for the people most in need. Surely that is the duty of this Parliament.

John McDonnell: I completely concur. I understand those who say that if we vote against this tonight we will be accused of voting against an increase, but far from it—if we vote against it we will be instructing the Government to come back immediately with an alternative that meets the cost of living challenge that working people now face.

It is no good relying on statistics from seven months ago when we know the crisis that people are facing. I find it interesting that the Government can arrive at flexibility when they are saving money but not when they want to assist our constituents. I say that because I was here for the debate on the triple lock. At that time, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) has pointed out, we were facing the prospect of an increase of 8% based on the triple lock linked to earnings. Actually, that was pretty damn accurate as to what people would be facing. The Government were fleet of foot. They scrapped the triple lock altogether, suspended its operation and then came forward with this.

Every Member who has spoken so far, on both sides of the House, has said that this will mean a cut in people's living standards when faced with the prospect of a 7% rate of inflation. The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) eloquently set out the rationale for why the Government needed to do more, but I say to him that the Government will not do more unless this House is firm in its view and rejects this order tonight. They will not come back with an emergency package unless

[John McDonnell]

we start kicking up a fuss on both sides of the House. That is why they have come to the House with an unamendable order. They were worried that if there was an amendable order, we could have had a majority in this House for doing something better on behalf of our constituents. I find it outrageous that they have tried to put us in this position.

The hon. Member for Amber Valley, who is no longer here, made an extremely interesting speech, as he always does. I do not usually agree with him on much, but he always presents an argument we can understand—or a rationale, anyway. His argument to the Government was that if they are trying to tell us that their social security system is meeting the needs of our people, they should publish the basket of goods, the costings and so on. Well, the Government do not do that, but others do.

Frequent reference has been made tonight to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's analysis of poverty and of what the Government's measures will do. The figures are startling. Over 8 million working households are in poverty, as are 2.1 million pensioners and 4.3 million of our children. My hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) made the point that, in the fifth richest country in the world, we have over 4 million children living in poverty. The figure for disabled people is now 3.8 million, which has increased dramatically over the last four or five years as a result of benefit cuts.

I am not willing to sit here tonight and be blackmailed into either voting for this motion or abstaining. I want the opportunity to vote against it and to give an instruction to the Government to go away and do better: to come back with a real proposal that will increase benefits, at least so that they match inflation. After 11 years of austerity, I would expect the Government to be coming up with proposals to start making up some of the ground that has been lost over that time, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) said.

I will make one final point. Every time we have one of these debates, we get a Government Minister telling us how wonderful they are because they have created all these new jobs that people can go into. I met a group of unpaid carers this morning, and I said that it looked as though their allowance was going to go from 67% to 69%. Given the hours they work as unpaid carers, even if they are doing 35 hours per week—most of them do triple that at times—they will be paid something like £2 an hour for what they do. Unpaid carers save this country about £130 billion in costs that would otherwise fall on the state. They cannot get other jobs because they are looking after their relatives. They are desperately underfunded and most of them, as a result, are living in poverty. This order will do nothing for them whatsoever.

My commitment to that group of carers I met this morning means that I will not vote for this. I will vote against it, and I will demand better action from this Government. I will demand that Ministers go away and come back tomorrow with a realistic proposal that will tackle poverty in this country and lift at least some of those carers out of the hardship and suffering that they are unfortunately experiencing at the moment.

6.39 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who spoke, as ever, with great moral force. This is a moral question.

It is important to put the issue under consideration into its full context. As long as I live, I will never forget being at one of my constituency advice sessions in Leeds East with a tearful constituent rolling up the sleeve of her jumper to show me the scar on her wrist from where she had attempted to take her own life as a result of her benefits being unfairly reduced. That will stay with me to the grave.

I mention that because it is how people on social security are treated in this country. They are scapegoated and treated as if they are somehow on the make, but we know the truth. We know who the real parasites are—the people who are really taking money from the public purse and not paying their fair share. They are some of those at the very top, who are very good at not paying tax, at not paying their fair share and at getting money out of the Government through corrupt covid contracts and the rest.

I also want to put the debate in the context of the historic cost of living crisis that people are facing. One of the things that brought it home to me, as well as speaking to people at my advice sessions, was a WhatsApp group with some of my friends who never talk politics—and not just because they do not want to hear my political views. We talk about music, but out of nowhere, rather than talking about the latest albums coming out, one of my friends—they are in a pretty well-paid job compared with many of my constituents—messed, “Is anyone else worried about paying their fuel bill?” That is the reality that people across the country are facing.

We have heard that this is the fifth richest country in the world, and it is true, but there are 4 million people living in poverty. We heard in the House earlier today about half a million children in this country who are not even able to sleep in a bed at night. There are also many disabled people who are being treated like dirt by the system and by the Government, but we are the fifth richest country in the world. Politics is about choices, and those choices are moral choices.

Only last week, Tory MPs turned out in force to let bankers off the hook with yet another tax giveaway, but they are notable tonight by their absence. Those green Benches are deserted. Is that because some Tory MPs have now developed a conscience about the millions of people struggling in our society? The smirk of a Tory MP says maybe not. Maybe they do not want to defend the indefensible. What is being proposed is another kick in the teeth for people struggling in my constituency and around the country.

As we have heard, this so-called increase is a real-terms cut for social security and a real-terms cut for pensions. They are using the figure of 3.1% from last October, but the Bank of England is predicting that by April, when the re-evaluation takes effect, the figure will be closer to 6%. That is a 3% to 4% real-terms cut for people who are already struggling to keep their heads above water.

That is not a one-off; it is part of a pattern of targeting ordinary people and the most vulnerable. The £20 cut to universal credit, which could not have come at a worst time, affected over 14,000 families in my

constituency alone, and millions of disabled people did not even get the uplift in the first place. We see the choice to bring in a national insurance hike, which is another kick in the teeth for people across the country, and now we see this real-terms cut to incomes. That is a choice. I say it is a moral choice, but in fact it is an immoral choice to stick the boot into people in our communities.

Let us look at the other side of the coin—at how others are doing. Gas giants and oil giants make an eye-watering £77 million in profits every day. A windfall tax on those megaprofits could mean that not a single person in this country has to face fuel poverty or food poverty. The Government have a choice: they choose to treat the super-rich with kid gloves, to demonise the vulnerable and scapegoat those on social security, and to stick the boot into ordinary people. It is the Conservative party doing what it has done for generations and generations.

The Government are making ordinary people pay for the covid crisis. There are corrupt covid contracts for some, VIP lanes for some, tax breaks for some and a refusal to tax the richest properly. I know it is sometimes unfashionable to talk about class politics, but this is class politics. The greatest practitioners of class politics in mainstream political parties in the history of this country are those in the Conservative party, which has practised class politics throughout its history—class politics on behalf of the 1% against the 99%. That is what the Conservatives are doing today by pretending that the best they can do for people in our country is a real-terms cut to social security and pensions during an historic cost of living crisis. That is what they are doing. It is absolutely heartless and absolutely immoral, which is why I shall vote against these orders.

We cannot just accept this as if it is the best that a Government in the fifth richest country on earth can do. We need better. The Government need to ditch this disgrace and come back with something better. As 33 charities have said, they need to come back with a 6% increase. I ask everyone in the House to find it within themselves to stand up for their constituents. Today, we need to speak up and vote for those who have had to choose between heating and eating; for those who are worried about not being able to afford school uniforms for their children; and for those in our society who have been treated for too long as if they do not matter.

Let us abolish food banks and indignity. In one of the richest countries in the world, let us turn things around. It makes me sick to the stomach to see how people are treated in our society. My constituents deserve better than this Conservative Government are giving them, as do people right across this country. The Government should take a good, hard look at themselves and, if they wish to sleep soundly and with a clean conscience tonight, they should drop this change and come back with 6%.

6.47 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank all right hon. and hon. Members from the Government and Opposition Benches who have made significant contributions. It is worth noting that there has almost been unanimity among all the Members who have contributed, and I suspect that will continue among those who follow me.

I thank my local DWP staff in Newtownards: the manageress, Geraldine, and all her staff do such great work. Every day of their lives they make it easier for my constituents when it comes to any contact they have with the DWP office.

It is not often that our pensioners get good news. Some had hoped that the Government would give them the good news of a substantial pension increase to match the substantial cost of living increase and the recent unbelievable uplift in the cost of heating, which automatically affects our pensioners and the very vulnerable the most.

In his economic statement to the House last Thursday, the Chancellor gave the constituents across Northern Ireland £150 million to help with the cost of energy. The Barnett consequentials brought another £100 million, making £250 million. We welcome that, so I will not be churlish about what has happened. We ought to recognise that. Everybody who has contributed to this debate has recognised the contribution that has been made, but we are saying we do not believe it has gone far enough.

Let me quickly make some comments on the cost of living. Pensioners did not look forward to the increase for very long, with the news that the Social Security (Up-rating of Benefits) Act 2021 suspended the earnings element of the triple lock for the 2022-23 financial year and that state pensions would be increased by CPI inflation of 3.1%—the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) referred to the triple lock in his contribution. The full rates for 2022-23 will be £185.15 per week for the new state pension for those reaching the state pension age on or after 6 April 2016, up from £179.60 in 2021-22. The figure will be £141.85 per week for the basic state pension—the core amount in the old state pension system—up from £137 in 2021-22.

We welcome the increases, but what is coming forward does not address the full impact of the cost of living, and I want to give some examples. Rents have risen by 5.8% in the last year and have increased at the fastest rate. A house in my constituency that would have been rented for £400 or maybe £450 a month is now £560 or £600. If we add all these increases together, I find it unbelievable that the cost of living is not higher—I might not be the greatest mathematician in the world, but we can figure these things out.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Like me, my hon. Friend must be alarmed at the comments by the head of Tesco, who has indicated that the cost of the average food basket will go up by 4% to 5%. The cost of living is really putting a squeeze on ordinary citizens across the entirety of the kingdom.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I was going to mention that earlier—I did do so in an intervention on the Minister. I really do have concerns. We have rent increases of £150 or £200 a month for a dwelling, and then we have the other things, with people not even having enough to cover the rise in the cost of heating. These things affect our most vulnerable and those we most respect, and society is always marked by how it treats those in the generation beyond. How long can we rob from the same pot—the same pot of stew—and how long will our consciences allow us so to do?

[Jim Shannon]

Those with more than two children cannot get working families tax allowance for more than two children. The Minister might wish to consider allowing people to claim for the children they have and not for how many the Government would mandate them to have. There are large families who cannot get the benefits for where they are, and it is time that we helped them.

I welcome the moneys the Government have set aside and allocated, but I am concerned about inflation. Just this weekend, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) referred to, the CEO of Tesco said that the cost of food will go up by another 5% on top of what is already there—in Northern Ireland the increase is somewhere around 15%. Energy prices continue to rise in Northern Ireland, by 25% to 30%. Here is another example, and it is not 25% to 30%, but more. Oil was advertised in about October last year at £375 for 900 litres. This week it is £529 for 900 litres. That is a 50% increase in my book. Again, I may not be the greatest mathematician, but I can work it out and, what is more, my constituents can work it out.

We have an increase in rent, we have an increase in food prices and we have an increase in energy prices, with electricity, gas and coal prices all going through the roof. If energy prices continue to rise and foodstuffs continue to be unbearably expensive for our constituents, householders and families, will the Government set aside more funding for the next period? I cannot remember which Member said—perhaps it was the Minister present—that we will bring things back in, say, eight or nine months, but we cannot wait nine months. The pain is now. That is what really concerns me.

Pensioners are under more pressure than ever before. I am reminded of TV ads in which competing supermarket chains say, “A weekly shop here costs this, and a weekly shop there costs that.” When we do a weekly shop today, we notice the difference from two or three months ago like never before.

What help can we give pensioners? I am conscious that the Minister and other Members referred to pension credit. Whenever I go round the doors to ask people what their problems are and what help they need—as I do regularly, by the way, not just at election time—I am surprised to find that many pensioners do not know all their rights. I feel that the Government and the DWP need to focus on pensioners, for example when it comes to the accessibility of pension credit. I also suspect that many people do not know that because of illness they can apply for attendance allowance. Those are the sort of things that can make life easier for people, so we need to see a wee bit more focus. Perhaps the Minister will come back to that point.

I found it hard to listen to the comments of the Governor of the Bank of England yesterday urging people not to ask for pay rises in order to keep inflation down. I understand the logic of what he is saying, but people on universal credit are overwhelmed with massive bills—the reality for the people whom I and Members on both sides of the House represent is that their bills will be enormous. I ask the Minister and the Government to step up to the mark and give us some indication of where we will be in three months’ time, if things are getting worse as they seem to be.

The Minister is a decent man and a good man; I know that he wants to see benefits coming to my constituents and to all constituents. The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) said that perhaps the Government need to target those who are now panicking, wondering how they will pay their bills and worried about the pressures of life and what will happen in the next three months. I support the thrust of what he says, because that is what we, and perhaps the Minister and the Government, need to focus on.

We are here to help our constituents. That is where the burden in our heart is, that is where our compassion comes from on behalf of our people, and that is why we really feel for them and their future if things are not as helpful as they could be. Those on the minimum wage, those who cannot get any more wages and those who cannot work extra hours face the spectre of debt coming towards them.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions and look forward to the Minister’s response to all our questions. We really need help—the Minister’s constituents need help, and so do mine and everybody else’s.

6.58 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Like all hon. Members, he highlighted the fact that the Government need to do more to deal with the cost of living crisis. It was characteristically optimistic of him to look forward to the Minister’s response; I have a funny feeling that we will not get much out of the Minister in that regard.

Of the two draft orders, I will concentrate first on the Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order. It is relatively straightforward, on one level; it will ensure that those on contracted-out pensions get an uplift in their contributions made between 1988 and 1997. Effectively, that seems to be a formality that happens every year. The percentage increase is capped at 3%, which makes me think that we have to consider whether that 3% rate is valid now. What happens if inflation remains rampant? That needs to be considered.

In preparing for the debate, I was concerned to read that as part of the transition to the single-tier pension in 2016, the DWP estimated that 50,000 people would lose out with guaranteed minimum pensions. In 2019, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman published a report stating that the DWP had not provided clear and accurate information that some pension holders could face negative long-term impacts on their pensions and their income. The Government responded in 2021 and developed a new factsheet. In developing that factsheet, how much discussion did they have with the PHSO and third-sector organisations? When will we see the review into its usage? As the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) pointed out, people are having difficulty accessing the factsheet. How many people have suffered negative consequences and what are the Government doing to assess that?

It is clear from the failings on the guaranteed minimum pension and the communications around that, the WASPI women and the botched communications with them, the pensions underpayments and the late payment of pensions once people reach state pension age that the pensions system has a long way to go before it is remotely close to being fit for purpose.

With those observations, I will turn to pensions in general, in terms of the social security uprating. I know that the Minister will probably dismiss most contributions from the Opposition, but as others have said, he would do well to listen to the excellent contributions from the hon. Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills). They should be a warning to the Government that more needs to be done.

UK pensions are the least generous in north-west Europe when compared with the average wage. That was confirmed by analysis undertaken by the House of Commons Library last year. When that is the case and when we have a cost of living crisis, it defies logic that the Tories think this is the time to break the triple lock guarantee on pensions and to break it in terms of the link with earnings.

As other Members have said, the CPI figure being applied is outdated, but I suspect it was also understated, considering the work done by Jack Monroe and the fact that the Office for National Statistics is saying that it will revise how it calculates CPI and inflation with regard to food. The 3.1% was probably an understatement at the time, and it has since been superseded.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): One of the original arguments the Government put forward for not linking pensions to the increase in wages was that wages had increased unusually because of the pandemic, when people were out of work and then went back into work. We now know that it is not just wages that have gone up; prices have gone up as well. That is having a real impact on pensioners and people on low incomes.

Alan Brown: Absolutely; food prices have gone up and the energy price cap is now circa £2,000. The Government are not doing enough to mitigate the effect of that price cap. The reality is that earnings are not reflecting the cost of living demands. That is the whole point of earnings increasing. It therefore makes no sense to break that link.

What we have from the Tory Government is a Budget that is based on taking money from the pockets of pensioners, and this week they have not done enough to address the energy cost crisis. They are doing very little. A £200 loan to people is insufficient. It is just another burden for bill payers to pay back. Even if people get the £150 council tax rebate on top of the £200 loan, the energy cap is going up by £700. That is a long way short of meeting people's requirements. Even when the rebates are taken off the price cap, people will be paying a net cost of £1,600 on their energy bills. That is a 40% increase. For those who have to pay the full cap, it is a 70% increase in energy prices in the last few months.

Pensioners are already struggling to make ends meet, and now they face this further erosion of their pension, while everything else is going up. As other Members have said, inflation is at its highest rate for 30 years and could go as high as 7%. Why oh why, in that context, do the Government think it is right to break their manifesto commitment on pensions? The Pensions Minister argues that pensions are increasing compared with this year, but the Red Book for the October Budget clearly states that breaking the triple lock is costing pensioners £520 a year. The Treasury will save £5.4 billion in financial year 2022-23 and a total of more than £30 billion in this Parliament. So the Chancellor is clearly balancing the

books on the backs of pensioners. The concern is: is this a precedent? If the Government do not like any part of the triple lock, will they say, "We'll ditch that bit of the triple lock, but we'll return to it in the future. Don't worry—it's just a one-off"? A precedent has been set. The reality is, the triple lock is crucial in ensuring that the state pension continues to rise to reflect the increasing cost of living. Removing it deprives pensioners of vital income to ensure dignity and fairness in retirement. Research by the House of Commons Library shows that nearly 1 million pensioners in Scotland will be directly impacted by the cut.

The Government's own statistics on households below average income show that, under Tory rule, UK pensioner poverty has risen to a 15-year high, with 2.1 million UK pensioners now classed as living in poverty once housing costs are allowed for. That is an increase of 200,000 on 2018-19, yet today the Pensions Minister had the brass neck to stand at the Dispatch Box and say that pension poverty has gone down under their watch. It is the exact opposite. These figures are based on the here and now—before the increase in the energy price cap kicks in—so it is clear that, unfortunately, the 2.1 million figure will dramatically increase. National Energy Action estimates that the increase in the price cap to £2,000 will result in between 5.5 million and 6.5 million households across the UK being fuel-poor.

One way in which the Government can help alleviate pensioner poverty is by ensuring that those eligible for pension credit are receiving it. We know that only about six in 10 of those who are entitled to it actually claim it, so the Government save £4 billion a year in unclaimed pension credit. If we look at the savings they are making through breaking the triple lock and what they hold back in pension credit, that is £10 billion this coming financial year alone, which could easily be in pensioners' pockets. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) said, when pensioners have that money in their pockets, it gets recirculated in local businesses because they need to spend that money on household essentials.

Research commissioned by Independent Age estimated that full take-up of pension credit could lift 440,000 older people out of poverty. When will the Government tackle that? I am less concerned about debating the 3.1% uplift in pension credit aspect—it is more important that people who are due pension credit actually get it. The Government must do everything they can to ensure that that happens. They speak about information campaigns, but, if they are serious about increasing pension credit uptake, how much money have they set aside for campaigning, information and working with third-sector organisations to ensure that people access pension credit? How much money have the Government set aside in the Budget as regards the hoped for increase, because they will clearly need to make more money available to pay that out?

Another cohort of pensioners is living in poverty: those who live abroad and are hampered by frozen pensions overseas. Many of them are veterans. It seems absurd that, when the Tories argued for giving lifetime votes to expats living abroad, they always used the brave veteran who fought for the UK and gave service in the armed forces as an example of someone who deserves a vote for life, yet they will not reward those veterans with a pension that allows them to live in dignity.

David Linden: The Government are not just giving overseas pensioners the right to vote but changing legislation to allow overseas pensioners the right to donate to election campaigns. So the Government are quite happy to take those pensioners' money, but they are not happy to give those pensioners the money that they paid in.

Alan Brown: That is a valid point that highlights the Government's complete hypocrisy. We can only hope that enough overseas pensioners use their vote the right way and send the Government a message. It is kind of absurd. Not only is it demeaning when people living abroad do not have enough money to live on, potentially after giving service in the armed forces, but some are forced to sell their homes and move back to the UK. The irony is that that brings increased health costs. If the Government are being purely financial about it, not giving people the standard of living that they are due does not even save them the money they think it does.

One other aspect of that, in terms of reciprocal agreements on overseas pensions, is that the Canadian Government have offered to work with the UK Government to get a reciprocal agreement to resolve that issue in Canada. So why are the Government not moving forward on that and working with the Canadian Government?

There is one other key policy that the SNP has long been campaigning for. It is calling on the UK Government to establish an independent savings and pensions commission to ensure that pension policies are fit for purpose and reflect the demographic needs of different parts of the UK. One aspect of pensions that raised its head over the weekend was the Better Together rehash of 2014, and how the UK will not honour its commitments to pensioners in an independent Scotland. It seems extraordinary to me that we are in a so-called Union of equals, yet threats are being made about pensions. It is shameful that Scottish Labour once again want to be all over this. It seems that the UK Government want to argue that they can ignore all those contributions from Scotland in terms of income tax and national insurance, and will withhold pension obligations, yet they expect an independent Scotland to take on a share of the debt that the UK Government have built up—that has never been built up by any Scottish Government. That is a complete paradox and it makes no sense.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alan Brown: I am not giving way to someone who came two hours late into a three-hour debate. *[Interruption.]* As one of my colleagues says, if a person came in that late to the jobcentre, they would be sanctioned. For me, the examples I have given say it all about the so-called most successful political Union: one where after 315 years, we still hear the mantra about needing to level up. Surely that Union is broken if there is an argument for levelling up.

I will now turn to policies, and the question of where the money to implement paying a much higher pension, for example, could come from. Comparing the November Budget with the March Budget, the Red Book showed that oil and gas revenues are going to bring in £6 billion extra over this Parliament. It is predicted that VAT

receipts could increase by £40 billion, and we know that the Treasury is continuing to get extra VAT from energy bills and from petrol, from extra fuel duties, so it is raking in money compared with where it thought it would be. It is high time that it reinvested that money to provide support for people in this cost of living crisis, instead of just continuing to take, take, take. That is why, for me, the reality is that only with the full powers of independence can we protect Scotland's pensioners, eradicate poverty and finally begin to build a more progressive nation.

7.13 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I start by thanking all those who have spoken in tonight's debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) set out the scale of the cost of living crisis and the need for more targeted support. We heard a series of interesting points from a number of hon. Members. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell); my hon. Friends the Members for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum), for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter), and for Leeds East (Richard Burgon); and the hon. Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous), for Glasgow East (David Linden), for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), who made some interesting points, for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and finally for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown).

There is no doubt that pensioners and families across this country now face a severe cost of living crisis. Food prices are up, gas prices are up, the cost of living is going up. The Bank of England says that households must brace themselves for the biggest drop in living standards in 30 years. Millions of people now face the choice between heating and eating. Pensioners, children and those in greatest need will, sadly, be hit hardest, yet so far, the best this Government can do is offer an inadequate "buy now, pay later" scheme. To make matters worse, the Chancellor and the Prime Minister are insisting on sticking with a national insurance hike that will hit working people and businesses hardest. Today, we have heard how the Government's failure extends to pensioners and those who rely on essential benefits.

I do not want to repeat the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North, and I understand that time is now limited, but in summing up I wish to focus on how Ministers are making this dreadful situation worse. The Chancellor could have raised a windfall tax to reduce energy bills, but instead he has chosen to protect the super-profits of the energy companies over the welfare of the nation's pensioners and most vulnerable. The Government's proposed council tax rebate may fail to reach those who need the most help. It is not clear how pensioners who do not pay council tax by direct debit because of their low income or who have other issues will receive this benefit. Dame Clare Moriarty, the chief executive officer of Citizens Advice, has said:

"Energy rebates are a buy now pay later solution which only provide temporary relief later this year. And linking financial assistance to Council Tax will result in a complicated lottery that means support is not targeted at people who really need it."

The Government have also failed to deliver on their manifesto promise to insulate homes and have failed to support businesses with energy cost rises. In contrast, a Labour Government would have offered real solutions, including a one-off windfall tax on energy company profits that would help all fairly, and provide support for business and long-term investment to improve our energy security and home insulation.

We will not be opposing today's up-rating order, but I want to make it clear that this is no solution to the wider crisis facing our pensioners. Pensioners were let down when the Government broke their manifesto promise and severed the earnings link component of the triple lock. They were also let down when the Government broke their manifesto promise to keep the TV licence free for over-75s. Almost a fifth of pensioners are living in poverty under this Government, and more than 1 million pensioner households are, sadly, missing out on pensioner tax credit, the take-up of which the Government seem to have done little to improve. I am also afraid that the DWP has underpaid pensions by thousands of pounds and been responsible, in some cases, for severe delays in payments. We know of some newly retired pensioners who have had to wait more than three months to receive their pension, which they have worked hard all their lives for. I am conscious of time, so I just want to sum up by saying that we face a severe cost of living crisis. Pensioners and families face a truly dreadful situation, yet the Government are failing to listen and failing to respond.

7.17 pm

David Rutley: I would like to begin by thanking those who have spoken today. These are indeed important matters and the uprating order provides for new rates of benefit from April 2022, as part of long-term provision to maintain their purchasing power. The Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order provides inflation protection for those in receipt of a guaranteed minimum pension. As set out in the debate, the uprating order increases state pensions and benefits by 3.1% from April 2022, representing an additional £4 billion of expenditure on benefits for pensioners and £2.6 billion on benefits for people below state pension age in 2022-23. Furthermore, the Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order increases the GMP by 3%, in line with primary legislation.

As the global economy recovers from the pandemic, consumer demand is surging, at the same time as global supply chains are being disrupted. The Government recognise and understand the pressures that is having on household incomes. Since the start of the pandemic the Government have provided more than £400 billion of support, and we have taken decisive steps to ease those pressures by providing a comprehensive package of support worth billions of pounds in this financial year. Hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) and colleagues on my side of the House—the Government Benches—including my hon. Friends the Members for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) and for Waveney (Peter Aldous), have talked about the £20 uplift in universal credit. It was temporary; it was designed to help claimants through the worst of the pandemic. However, we continue to provide a meaningful and substantial package of support.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

David Rutley: I am going to make some progress. This support includes: a £1,000 pay rise to full-time workers on the national living wage; cutting the universal credit taper rate by 8%; and increasing work allowances by a further £500. These are substantial steps.

Debbie Abrahams: The Minister and I have shared many train journeys to and from the north-west, but I want to pick him up on what he has just said. He has said that what is being provided is “substantial”, but all the evidence from all of us, on both sides of the House—including his own side—has shown that it is anything but substantial. It will not cover, for instance, the cost of living crisis and the increase in inflation, and it is not sufficient in the context of the last 12 years. Please can you think again? This is just not adequate for my constituents or for yours.

David Rutley: I think that “you” should apply to the Chair, but I understand the point that the hon. Member has made, and we have indeed shared platforms and train journeys. The point I was making was that in addition to the uprating, a wider package of support is available, and it is substantial. It involves billions of pounds.

David Linden: The Minister spoke earlier about the vast package of support contained in these measures. Can he name one measure that applies to the 2.5 million disabled people who were so cruelly left behind by this Government during the pandemic, and are still being overlooked by them now?

David Rutley: As we explained during oral questions earlier today, we are providing a package of £58 billion in support for the disabled, and we are working incredibly hard to ensure that more of them who are able to do so can get into work. A huge package is available. We have talked about the three-part plan that the Chancellor set out last week, involving £9 billion of support to tackle the energy challenges facing people across the country, in addition to the normal support that we provide.

Andy McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

David Rutley: I will make some more progress.

The aim over the two years of the pandemic has been to give fairness to pensioners by protecting the value of the state pension in 2021-22, despite the decline in earnings, and to taxpayers in 2022-23 by suspending the earnings limb of the triple lock because of a statistical anomaly, distorted by the cumulative effects of the economic impacts of coronavirus. Although inflation rose by 0.5% last year, pensions rose by 2.5%, and this year they rose by 3.1%. Over two years, pensions have risen by 5.6%.

The right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) made an important point about pension credit take-up. I have been speaking to my colleague the Pensions Minister, who says that take-up increased from 71% in 2017-18 to 77% in 2018-19. However, more work is clearly needed, and we are working very hard to increase awareness.

John McDonnell: Will the Minister give way?

David Rutley: I will, but probably for the last time. I need to make progress.

John McDonnell: Can the Minister explain why 8% is a statistical anomaly and 7% is not?

David Rutley: I do not know what maths the right hon. Gentleman is talking about, but what I have been saying is that we have been working hard—

John McDonnell *rose—*

David Rutley: The right hon. Gentleman has had a chance to make his point, and it was not made particularly well. [*Interruption.*] I was listening, but I did not understand the point that the right hon. Gentleman was making. The point that I am making is that we are taking important steps to tackle the challenges faced by the country.

The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) made a couple of points about GMP uprating formulas. That is a separate piece of primary legislation. The right hon. Member for East Ham—the Chair of the Select Committee—also made points about GMP, and particularly about communication-related issues. The Department will supply a written review of those issues shortly. The hon. Member for Westminster North made points about local housing allowance rates. We have increased them by about £1 billion, which has given 1.5 million claimants an average of £600 more housing support in 2020-21, and we are maintaining those significant increases.

It is interesting to note that throughout much of this debate, hardly any Opposition Members mentioned that we are now experiencing a record number of vacancies. Our focus needs to be on getting people into work. There has been talk of poverty. Our approach is absolutely to tackle poverty. Since 2020, 700,000 fewer people are in absolute poverty before housing costs, including 100,000 fewer children and 200,000 fewer pensioners. We need to ensure that we fill those vacancies and end those shortages, and that more people take jobs in hospitality, tech, social care and healthcare.

John McDonnell: Will the Minister give way?

David Rutley: I have already given way once to the right hon. Gentleman.

Employment stands at 32.4 million, up 60,000 in the quarter and up 3.2 million since 2010. The year 2010 is significant, as the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington knows, because his party had 13 years in power to change how the uprating legislation works, and it did not do a thing.

The draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order increases state pensions and benefits by 3.1% from April 2022. The draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order increases the guaranteed minimum pension by 3%, in line with primary legislation. For those reasons, I commend these orders to the House.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 298, Noes 29.

Division No. 185]

[7.25 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim	Allan, Lucy
Afriyie, Adam	Anderson, Lee
Aiken, Nickie	Anderson, Stuart
Aldous, Peter	Andrew, rh Stuart

Ansell, Caroline	Drummond, Mrs Flick
Argar, Edward	Duddridge, James
Atherton, Sarah	Duguid, David
Atkins, Victoria	Dunne, rh Philip
Bacon, Gareth	Eastwood, Mark
Bacon, Mr Richard	Edwards, Ruth
Bailey, Shaun	Ellis, rh Michael
Baillie, Siobhan	Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Baker, Duncan	Eustice, rh George
Baker, Mr Steve	Evans, Dr Luke
Baldwin, Harriett	Everitt, Ben
Baron, Mr John	Fabricant, Michael
Baynes, Simon	Farris, Laura
Bell, Aaron	Fell, Simon
Benton, Scott	Firth, Anna
Beresford, Sir Paul	Fletcher, Katherine
Berry, rh Jake	Fletcher, Mark
Bhatti, Saqib	Fletcher, Nick
Blackman, Bob	Ford, Vicky
Blunt, Crispin	Foster, Kevin
Bone, Mr Peter	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Bowie, Andrew	Frazer, rh Lucy
Bradley, rh Karen	Freer, Mike
Brady, Sir Graham	French, Mr Louie
Braverman, rh Suella	Fuller, Richard
Brereton, Jack	Gale, rh Sir Roger
Bridgen, Andrew	Gibb, rh Nick
Brine, Steve	Gibson, Peter
Bristow, Paul	Gideon, Jo
Browne, Anthony	Glen, John
Bruce, Fiona	Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Buchan, Felicity	Graham, Richard
Buckland, rh Sir Robert	Grant, Mrs Helen
Burghart, Alex	Gray, James
Burns, rh Conor	Grayling, rh Chris
Butler, Rob	Green, Chris
Cairns, rh Alun	Green, rh Damian
Carter, Andy	Griffith, Andrew
Cartlidge, James	Griffiths, Kate
Cash, Sir William	Grundy, James
Cates, Miriam	Halfon, rh Robert
Caulfield, Maria	Hall, Luke
Chalk, Alex	Hammond, Stephen
Chishti, Rehman	Hancock, rh Matt
Churchill, Jo	Harper, rh Mr Mark
Clark, rh Greg	Harris, Rebecca
Clarke, rh Mr Simon	Harrison, Trudy
Clarke, Theo	Hart, Sally-Ann
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Hart, rh Simon
Clarkson, Chris	Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Heapey, James
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse	Heaton-Harris, Chris
Colburn, Elliot	Henderson, Gordon
Collins, Damian	Higginbotham, Antony
Costa, Alberto	Hinds, rh Damian
Coutinho, Claire	Hoare, Simon
Crosbie, Virginia	Holden, Mr Richard
Crouch, Tracey	Hollinrake, Kevin
Daly, James	Hollobone, Mr Philip
Davies, David T. C.	Howell, John
Davies, Gareth	Howell, Paul
Davies, Dr James	Huddleston, Nigel
Davies, Mims	Hudson, Dr Neil
Davies, Philip	Hughes, Eddie
Davison, Dehenna	Hunt, Jane
Dines, Miss Sarah	Hunt, rh Jeremy
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Hunt, Tom
Donelan, rh Michelle	Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Double, Steve	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Dowden, rh Oliver	Jenkinson, Mark
Doyle-Price, Jackie	Jenrick, rh Robert
Drax, Richard	Johnson, Dr Caroline

Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike

Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne

Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggins, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig

Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Andrea Jenkyns and
 Gareth Johnson

NOES

Begum, Apsana
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, Ian
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carden, Dan
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Farry, Stephen
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Girvan, Paul
 Hanna, Claire
 Lavery, Ian
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Tony

Long Bailey, Rebecca
 McDonnell, rh John
 Morris, Grahame
 Paisley, Ian
 Robinson, Gavin
 Shannon, Jim
 Smith, Cat
 Stephens, Chris
 Sultana, Zarah
 Webbe, Claudia
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Winter, Beth

Tellers for the Noes:
 Andy McDonald and
 Bell Ribeiro-Addy

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2022, which was laid before this House on 17 January, be approved.

PENSIONS

Resolved,

That the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2022, which was laid before this House on 17 January, be approved.—
(David Rutley.)

NORTHERN IRELAND (MINISTERS, ELECTIONS AND PETITIONS OF CONCERN) BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO.3)

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

That the following provision shall apply to the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 22 June 2021 (Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern Bill) (Programme)), as varied by the Order of 26 October 2021 (Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern Bill) (Programme) (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

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

Subsequent stages

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

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

Question agreed to.

Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

After Clause 3

TRANSITIONAL PROVISION

7.40 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Conor Burns): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to consider Lords amendment 2.

Conor Burns: Before I come to the Lords amendments, I say to the House that this is the first occasion that a Northern Ireland Office Minister has been before the House since the withdrawal of the First Minister of Northern Ireland from the Northern Ireland Executive in recent days. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is in close contact with the party leaders in Northern Ireland, the Government of the Irish Republic and others. Our strong message to the party of the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) is that we would rather he returned his party to the Executive. A stable Executive and stable governance are in the interest of the people who matter the most in all this—the people of Northern Ireland.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Minister must recognise that it is in the hands of the Government to restore the situation in Northern Ireland quickly by simply living up to their promise that there would be no separation between Northern Ireland and the rest of our market in GB, and no constitutional separation between Northern Ireland and the country to which we belong. If the Minister and his Government were to take action to live up to that promise and to take on the EU, we would be back in government tomorrow.

Conor Burns: As a courtesy, I thought to update the House briefly before the substantive business before us. I say to the right hon. Gentleman that talks between the Government and the Commission to make the changes necessary to the protocol to make it work for all the people of Northern Ireland are ongoing and intense. Those discussions will continue until we get to a satisfactory conclusion. If we do not, the Government's position has been clear: we will take the necessary steps available to us to act unilaterally.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Conor Burns: If my right hon. Friend will forgive me, I will not; the business of the House that we are dealing with is Lords amendments.

I thank the other place for its scrutiny of the Bill. I pay particular tribute to my noble friend Lord Caine for guiding it through the other place and to my noble friend Viscount Younger for his work in assisting him during the Lords stages of the Bill.

There are two Lords amendments to consider this evening, both of which deal with the commencement clauses of the Bill. Both here and in the other place, the

Government were clear that we would consider early commencement if the political situation in Northern Ireland were to warrant it. We listened to the strength of argument put forward by the political parties of Northern Ireland in both Chambers and agreed to make this concession.

Lords amendment 2 will allow for provisions in the Bill to come into effect on the day of Royal Assent. To ensure that there is no ambiguity over whether the provisions of the legislation apply, Lords amendment 1 allows for the relevant provisions in the Bill to apply retrospectively if Royal Assent coincides with the resignation of a First Minister, thus triggering the existing seven-day Executive formation period.

In practice, that means that if Royal Assent is given by Thursday this week, the relevant provisions of the Bill will apply retrospectively, and instead of the seven-day period for filling the offices of First and Deputy First Minister applying, the new period of up to 24 weeks will apply, as agreed under New Decade, New Approach, which was negotiated by my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith), who is sitting behind me. I therefore urge the House to agree to the Lords amendments.

7.45 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his place in leading on this important Bill, which has taken on great significance due to the resignation of the First Minister of Northern Ireland. I thank colleagues from across the House who served in Committee and those in the other place who worked to secure the necessary amendments that we are discussing today.

The Belfast/Good Friday agreement is one of Labour's most important political legacies. We therefore welcome attempts to safeguard power sharing and improve the sustainability of the Executive, the Assembly and the institutions, which have collapsed previously and are in crisis once again. The Bill emerged from a cross-party commitment made in the New Decade, New Approach deal, which was signed over two years ago. I pay tribute to the considerable work and achievements of the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) in negotiating that deal, which thankfully returned a functioning Executive in time to serve the people of Northern Ireland during the pandemic. It is a crying shame that the Government did not treat legislation that flowed from that agreement with the same priority as those who negotiated it. Because of the two-year delay in reaching this point, we have found ourselves in a situation where this Bill is being treated as emergency legislation whose retrospective powers will be activated immediately on Royal Assent.

New Decade, New Approach was about strengthening the institutional framework on which politics in Northern Ireland can be built in the coming period. By leaving it so late, Ministers have allowed it to be perceived as keeping the wheels turning for as long as possible before they come loose. The delay is symptomatic of an approach to Northern Ireland where promises are constantly allowed to drift. The amendments before us today were drafted to deal with a hypothetical power vacuum that has become a reality due to the Government's lack of focus on the political deterioration in Northern Ireland. They will remove the requirement for the Secretary of

State for Northern Ireland to set a date for an election if the positions of First Minister and Deputy First Minister are not filled by the end of this week.

That these amendments were accepted by the Government in the Lords is an admission that the delayed passage of this Bill was negligent. The instability caused by a First Minister resigning is unsettling for all of us who cherish the Good Friday agreement and believe that its institutions and the principles that underpin it represent the best way forward for Northern Ireland. As ever, that instability has been most keenly felt by the people of Northern Ireland. It is regrettable that a political crisis in one of our United Kingdom's devolved legislatures is not on the front page of every national newspaper.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that in that light, because there now is a crisis, it is astonishing that we have not seen any Government Minister come to the Dispatch Box to make a statement on the Government's policy? That would have been in the interests of everybody, whatever their views.

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for the service to the people of Northern Ireland that my hon. Friend has given from the Labour Front Bench over the years. He makes a very pertinent point. I was flabbergasted, on a Friday during a real crisis in Northern Ireland, to see the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland tweeting about "Game of Thrones" and not the situation that was unfolding. That was a negligent approach to the situation and to the responsibility that the Northern Ireland Secretary has to be present. There are several Secretaries of State with responsibility for negotiating, commenting on and making policy that has a profound impact on the people and politics of Northern Ireland. The fact that none of them has come to this place to answer questions in recent days is negligent.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): This crisis has been caused by the ongoing negotiations over the Northern Ireland protocol. Given that traditionally the Opposition have worked with a degree of consensus with the Government on Northern Ireland matters, will the Opposition support the Government if they act unilaterally on the protocol in order to ensure the unity of the United Kingdom, which surely the Labour party agrees with as much as us?

Peter Kyle: The consensus that needs building is between political parties in Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister has now been revealed as having been making promises and pledges to parties in Northern Ireland and failing to meet them, which I think is what underpins the failure we see in Northern Ireland at this time.

Sammy Wilson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Kyle: I am going to make some progress, because I am coming to aspects of what we have been commenting on that I think the right hon. Gentleman will want to intervene on more pertinently.

We are here to talk about Lords amendments, but I will stray on to other areas simply because of the lack of availability of Ministers to answer questions in this place.

John Redwood: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Kyle: I will make progress, and then I will take more interventions.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I must remind the House, lest he be tempted to take too many interventions, that we have only one hour for this—until 8.40 pm. He certainly has not taken too long so far, but I just want to protect him from the temptation.

Peter Kyle: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; your protection is always welcome. I try my best to defend myself and to embrace as many interventions as possible, while bearing in mind that other Members from Northern Ireland also need to speak in the debate.

Power sharing is a fundamental outcome of the peace process. The Belfast/Good Friday agreement is not an abstract. Strand 1 details the envisioned day-to-day functioning of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive.

The support for power sharing among the public in Northern Ireland is resolute. As Professor Tonge said in an evidence session on this Bill:

"Devolved power sharing is overwhelmingly a preferred option that comes back from each of those surveys—never larger, it should be said, than in 2019, which might be seen as remarkable given the hiatus in devolution from January 2017 until just after the election in December 2019. So the public have never lost faith with devolved power sharing. They have continued to support it."—[*Official Report, Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Public Bill Committee*, 29 June 2021; c. 7-8.]

People in Northern Ireland are now emerging from a profound health crisis. Constituents in all parts of the United Kingdom are facing a cost of living crisis and huge public service challenges—multiple crises. For all political leaders in Northern Ireland, these are priorities that people want to be addressed in the coming weeks, in addition to valid constitutional issues, which must be resolved, as a result of the protocol that this Government negotiated and signed.

Lords amendments 1 and 2 allow the Bill to have an immediate commencement and for its provisions to apply if it receives Royal Assent during the seven-day Executive formation period following a First Minister or Deputy First Minister resignation. The Labour party fully supports the Lords amendments, but it is disappointing that the optimism of the New Decade, New Approach deal has not been realised.

John Redwood: In the light of these Lords amendments for a crisis, does the hon. Gentleman not think the crisis has been brought on by the EU interfering in the internal market of GB and Northern Ireland and diverting trade, and would he urge the EU to step back so that we can get back on track?

Peter Kyle: What is holding us back is people continually re-fighting the battles of the past. We need to build a better future, and we can do that only if we are facing the future, unlike the right hon. Gentleman. Instead of a break from the past, the Government have dragged us back into the Brexit quagmire, as he and others seem hell-bent on doing, which has directly led to the Bill being needed with immediate effect.

Northern Ireland has often been a secondary issue for this Government. When the consequences of decisions taken by Ministers have played out in Northern Ireland, the Government have behaved as though they found

[Peter Kyle]

themselves at the scene of an accident over which they had no control. This bystander effect peaked last week. The Northern Ireland Secretary and the Foreign Secretary both pretended that the Northern Ireland protocol was purely a matter for the Executive, but in reality it was part of a deal drafted, negotiated and signed by the Prime Minister, and the legal duty to uphold that deal rests with the EU and UK Governments. Ministers cannot wash their hands of it as easily as they pretend.

Now the First Minister has resigned, with the protocol and broken ministerial promises playing a central role. The manner and impact of the resignation raise serious questions that must be addressed. I have sympathy for the position in which the Democratic Unionist party has been placed. The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), in frustration, revealed that the Prime Minister told him that the current protocol negotiations have only a 30% chance of success. If that is the case, do the Government have a plan B? Have Departments worked up impact assessments and action plans for the eventuality or possibility of article 16 being triggered?

The people of Northern Ireland and the political parties have been given promise after promise by the Prime Minister and his Ministers, some of them fundamental and existential, such as the promise of no border in the Irish sea. It is no wonder that frustrations have boiled over, that trust in this Government is at rock bottom and that we find ourselves in this moment where hope seems so distant.

We have just discovered that the Northern Ireland Secretary is flying to Washington tomorrow. That is right: the Secretary of State will get in a plane and fly right over Northern Ireland on his way to Washington. That says everything we need to know. There is no one with the stature required in this Government, so he has to go to America to find a grown-up to be the honest broker they need.

While the Labour party welcomes this legislation and has supported its progress at every stage, we cannot pretend that it has an answer for how the Executive will be reformed if more progress is not made in protocol negotiations. It is hard to know whether the ongoing negotiations with the EU are a priority, because after three rounds of negotiations there have been no statements on progress made to the House. Considering the vital importance of those negotiations to the immediate circumstances in Northern Ireland, I hope the Foreign Secretary can come here and make a statement without any more delay. The political parties in Northern Ireland deserve such an update on the record—we have had enough nods, enough winks and enough back-handed promises that are never met and do nothing more than destabilise the fragile political settlement.

The Bill was supposed to deliver greater resilience in the institutions established under the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday agreement, but once again their fragility has been highlighted. Too often, Northern Ireland has been overlooked and the work to deliver on the promise of peace allowed to stall. While the Labour party supports the Bill and hopes it receives Royal Assent in time to be effective, it is worrying how much of it may already be obsolete. The provisions of the Bill alone cannot enable stability. To do that, Ministers must take responsibility for their words and actions, which have shaken faith

within Northern Ireland. It is time that this Government, from the Prime Minister down, are seen to care about their words, promises and actions in a vitally important part of our United Kingdom, and to directly work on a way back for the Executive.

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I support the amendment that will ensure that the Bill has immediate effect. That is a positive one, as is the new clause outlining the transitional arrangements that mean if the Bill gains Royal Assent this week, the powers in it, and in particular the provisions to allow for a longer caretaker Administration, will kick in seven days prior to Royal Assent. That means they will apply from last week and ensure that the pull-out last Thursday by the First Minister is subject to the longer caretaker period.

Some questions remain, however. Why has this Bill taken so long to come through Parliament? A simple, quick Bill to protect power sharing is finally enacted, two years after the New Decade, New Approach deal and nine months after it was first introduced to this House.

Is it really just coincidence that the seven-day retrospective power, which ensures that last week's pull-out is covered by the newly introduced transitional provision clause, was introduced to the Lords last month? People across Northern Ireland have concerns and questions about how involved the Government were in last week's decision by the First Minister to leave power sharing. I would be grateful if the Minister could explain the context of last week's pull-out from the UK Government's point of view and how the retrospective amendment just happened to be put in place weeks ago and now fits perfectly with events as they have panned out. We need honesty on that, but we also need clarity on a couple of other points. Why did the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland state last week that the UK Government might not uphold their international obligations? Is that really the Government's position? I am sure it is not the Minister's position.

On the Foreign Secretary's visit to Belfast the previous weekend, why did she apparently not meet all parties across the political spectrum? How does that fit with Good Friday agreement obligations on treating all communities with respect?

8 pm

All these points are linked, as they show that, at the moment, the UK's commitment to the Good Friday agreement, in deed not just word, is currently shaky at best. Power sharing, honest brokering and the rule of law, all these commitments under the Good Friday agreement are vital to preserving trust and, I would argue, to preserving our United Kingdom.

Today's amendments mean that some form of government can continue, despite the pull-out last week. For the people of Northern Ireland, for businesses, for young people and for those who want to get on with education reform, health reform and the Budget, this is a deeply depressing state of affairs. Having worked with so many others across this House and beyond to get Stormont back up and running two years ago, last Thursday was deeply depressing.

Power sharing is supported in Northern Ireland despite its flaws. Day-to-day political decision making is needed, even more so now. These provisions help to keep the

show on the road, but the lack of a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister, and the fall of the Executive, is really bad news for the majority of women and men in Northern Ireland who support the GFA institutions and who want to have good governance and leadership.

Members should take a look at the charities, the young people and the vulnerable citizens who spoke out over the weekend, reacting to last week's events. Have they been through two years of pandemic only to find that some politicians have decided to desert them in their hour of need? Yet again, the majority who want to get on with day-to-day life and day-to-day business are held hostage by the parallel universe of elements of the Northern Ireland political world. I urge the Government to make a full statement to this House on Stormont and to reassert immediately their commitment and conviction on power sharing and on restoring it in full forthwith.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I note the Minister's opening remarks on the present situation. I have previously made my own views and those of my party pretty clear on the manner of the UK's departure from the European Union and the negative consequences that have flowed, and I do not intend to detain the House by repeating them here. Time is short and there are voices that need to be heard in this debate far more than mine.

The SNP has supported this legislation throughout its passage, because we believe it improves transparency and accountability in governance in Northern Ireland. It also gives the time and, more importantly perhaps, the space for politics to do what it needs to do in terms of cross-community discussions on the way forward for politics in Northern Ireland.

We are content to support the Lords amendments, and we believe they can be positive. We are happy to support them on that basis.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), in a fantastic speech, spoke about the importance of trust in all this. He is absolutely right, and my right hon. Friend the Minister will concur that the overarching objective has to be to rebuild trust between the parties as quickly as possible.

I agree with every word my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) said. The rule of law is so important. Honouring the rule of law and our international obligations should be the hallmark of any Tory Government—of any Government in this country, I should say, but particularly one of our side. To have that thrown into question when we have willingly signed up to agreements, understanding them perfectly, as the noble Lord Frost confirmed to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee some months ago, and to seek to resile from that now, pretending we did not quite understand what it meant or that we did not think that people would hold us to what we signed up to, shows so much brass neck as to be unspeakable.

I welcome the Lords amendments and their necessity. Thankfully, the Government did not go down the road of double jobbing. Unfortunately, we missed the opportunity to create a joint First Minister. As we all know, in essence the positions are joint—neither the left hand nor the right hand can do anything without the other saying yes or no—and that might be a way to move these things forward.

Yet again, we find ourselves in a situation in which self-service rather than public service has trumped all decisions. What happened last week was, in my judgment, an abdication of responsibility. Rage against the protocol if you will—tear your hair out and rend your clothes about the protocol; go on marches; do what the hell you like—but do not abandon the communities of Northern Ireland.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): The hon. Member should choose his words very carefully when he says to people in Northern Ireland, “Do whatever”—I will not repeat the profane language—“you like.” He talks about the rule of law; does he agree that doing what you like does not include taking up arms or going out and committing acts of violence and that when we use language we should be very careful and precise by what we mean when we say, “Do what you like to oppose the protocol”?

Simon Hoare: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I refer him to the exchanges among a number of us in the NIAC last summer on that very issue. When I say, “Do what the hell you like,” I am talking about within the rule of law—protest, petition, demonstrate. Of course, nobody is advocating breaking the law and it would be preposterous to suggest that I as a Tory would suggest that.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon made reference to the voluntary sector and those most in need in both and all communities of Northern Ireland. We saw what happened in the last interregnum: health outputs down, education outputs down and infrastructure and housing moving backwards. As always, it is those who are most in need of those services, in all communities, who are going to be hit the hardest. We know where this ends up. It is a diminution of the quality of life of those people who live in Northern Ireland and who, as we move out of covid, are now looking, perfectly legitimately, to their local politicians to craft local solutions to local problems.

Now is not a time for self-service; now is a time for us all, with our shoulders to the wheel, to serve those communities that, for too many decades, have suffered disproportionately as fellow citizens of the United Kingdom. I do hope that this is a temporary impasse, that the burden is taken up again and that public service is recognised as important. I suggest that if it is not, those communities will have their say in the ballot box in the coming weeks.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Everybody can see how many people want to contribute and the winding-up speech will start at 8.34 pm, so will Members please be mindful of the length of their contributions so that we can get as many people in as possible?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this brief debate.

The Lords amendments are indeed a matter for the Government, but let me be absolutely clear in response to the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith): there is absolutely no question of some form of collusion—a popular word in Northern Ireland—between my party and the Government on the timing of the amendments. As far back as last September, I indicated

[Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson]

the course of action that I would take if the Government failed to act and to honour their commitments in New Decade, New Approach. I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that the timing of our decision was not influenced by any amendment to the Bill.

The amendments will ensure that the Bill's provisions are retrospective in nature, to a degree that is, as I say, a matter for the Government, but if we do not get a resolution to the issues that have given rise to the current impasse in Northern Ireland and to the decision to withdraw the First Minister, frankly the amendments and the Bill will be irrelevant. If we do not get a resolution within the next six weeks, it matters little whether or not this legislation is retrospective. Personally, I would love to see a resolution in the next six weeks. I can assure the House that if that happens, we will not be found wanting in reinstating the institutions and restoring Ministers to office.

In the short time available, I want to remind the House, as the right hon. Gentleman did, that New Decade, New Approach is a detailed, delicately balanced agreement. I commend him for his work during his time as Secretary of State to help to bring it about, but it is an agreement that has not been fully honoured. I commend the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) for recognising the frustration felt among DUP Members about the Government's failure to honour their commitments.

Annex A is titled "UK Government Commitments to Northern Ireland". Those commitments were made on behalf of the Government by the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon, who I accept is not in office and therefore cannot directly be held responsible for the failure to deliver them. However, the idea that it is merely for the parties in Northern Ireland to deliver their commitments, and that the Government can sit on their hands and not deliver their side of the agreement, just does not add up.

I am a Unionist. I believe passionately in Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom. At the heart of the Belfast agreement is the principle of consensus. The former leader of the Social Democratic and Labour party, John Hume, told us time after time that the way forward in Northern Ireland was not the politics of one side being in charge of the other and of majority rule; it was about consensus. On a matter as fundamental as Northern Ireland's relationship with the rest of the United Kingdom and the harm that the protocol is doing to that relationship, there is not a consensus in Northern Ireland. There is not a single Unionist party and not a single Unionist elected representative who supports the protocol.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): I thank the right hon. Member for giving way; I regret that he was not so comfortable with the words and language of John Hume for many years. Will he agree, then, that there was no consent for the Brexit that he and his party pursued? Does he agree that Brexit was presented, as Mark Durkan has put it,

"as a consent-free mystery tour"?

Does he acknowledge that his party was wrong to oppose the numerous amendments that attempted to write in a role for the Northern Ireland Assembly and for the people of Northern Ireland?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I remember the former Member for Foyle telling us that what we really needed to do was

"to remove some of the ugly scaffolding"

of the Good Friday agreement. The sooner we get on with some of that, the better, but that does not involve negating the need for dual consent in Northern Ireland. That consent is not forthcoming from the people I represent.

There is this idea that the protocol can be proceeded with by ignoring the wishes of Unionists and just telling us, "Get on with it—you can rage against it," but that is not what the agreement says. It says that the Government will bring forward

"measures to protect and strengthen the UK internal market"

and Northern Ireland's place within it. Yet since the agreement two years ago and since the Command Paper more than six months ago, the Government have done nothing to protect Northern Ireland's place in the internal market. They have not honoured their commitment in the agreement, which is the basis on which my party re-entered the power-sharing institutions in Northern Ireland. How long are we expected to be in the position of my Ministers having to implement measures that, day after day, are harming Northern Ireland's relationship with the rest of the United Kingdom and our economy?

Sammy Wilson: Does my right hon. Friend agree that as time has gone on, the EU, rather than trying to ameliorate the concerns of Unionists, has tried to stoke the fires of frustration and opposition to the point where it is now saying that people travelling from GB to Northern Ireland should have their vehicles searched and their possessions taken out because they are moving into a different country?

8.15 pm

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: My right hon. Friend makes a very powerful point. If the European Union insisted that the personal belongings of Conservative Members' constituents were searched every time they moved from one part of the United Kingdom to another, would those Members hear about that from their constituents? Might those constituents have cause for complaint? Yet that is what my constituents will be subjected to if the European Union has its way and the full and vigorous implementation of the protocol is taken forward.

At Christmas, a constituent—a lady who lives in Lisburn and who is the former principal of an integrated college in my constituency—received a Christmas card from her sister, who lives in Llanelli, in Wales. On the envelope was a customs stamp with a customs fee of £3—a customs fee of £3 to send a Christmas card from one member of a family in one part of the United Kingdom to another member of the family in another part of the United Kingdom. My constituents and those of my right hon. and hon. Friends are being subjected to this kind of thing.

John Redwood: But is it not the case that the EU is breaking the protocol? The protocol clearly protects the UK internal market and says that communities' consent is needed and that trade must not be diverted.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Article 16 of the protocol—this is relevant to the debate this evening—makes provision for the UK Government to act unilaterally, and the Minister has said that the Government are prepared to do that. However, they said that in their Command Paper over six months ago, and in those six months the cost to Northern Ireland businesses has exceeded well over half a billion pounds. In those six months, businesses in Northern Ireland have faced costs and disruption to their trade with the rest of the United Kingdom. This is simply unacceptable.

The European Union said that the main purpose of the protocol, apart from setting out practical arrangements for the movement of goods, was to protect the political institutions in Northern Ireland and the Good Friday agreement. Does anyone now seriously believe that the protocol has achieved that purpose? It has not. Why? Because there is no Unionist consent for the protocol. It has changed our constitutional status with the rest of the United Kingdom. It has superseded article 6 of the Act of Union itself, which makes provision for free trade within our own country.

I am therefore disappointed that, although we are debating this Bill and the issues it addresses, they are relatively minor in comparison with the key commitments made by the Government in the New Decade, New Decade agreement, which have not been honoured two years later. Why should my constituents be treated as second-class citizens in their own country? Why should my constituents be subjected to laws that are imposed by a European Union over which we have no say whatever? We have regulations that my Ministers are required to implement and over which we have no say whatever.

We have been patient. We have waited and we have waited for the Government to act or for the EU to recognise the reality that this protocol is harming political and economic stability in Northern Ireland. But I am afraid that I have to say to the Minister: enough is enough. We need action—not words, not more promises, as the hon. Member for Hove said, and not more empty commitments. We need action by the Government, because this is about the Union, about the future of the Union and about protecting Northern Ireland's place within the internal market of our own country. Why are we leaving it to the European Union to come up with a solution? This Government are the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Their primary responsibility is the integrity of this country. It is time the integrity of this country, and Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom, was properly protected in line with the promises made in this agreement.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): It seems there is an election in the air. It is wonderful to hear all the new converts to the Good Friday agreement and civil rights. I wonder where they were when the Good Friday agreement was being signed, or when people were marching for their civil rights on the streets of my constituency and others. *[Interruption.]* Well, you weren't there anyway.

I remember that, in the negotiations that led to the New Decade, New Approach agreement, the people arguing for this piece of legislation were the Democratic Unionist party. Rightly, they made the argument that Sinn Féin might bring the Assembly down. Of course, we had good evidence to say they might because they

brought it down and it was down for three years. At that point I thought, "Good, everybody's learned their lesson. Bringing the Assembly down gets us nowhere. All it does is have longer waiting lists. Our school estates are crumbling, our economy is not being dealt with. Maybe finally we are at the point now where people have learned their lesson that when you get elected to be in a position you have to go there. You have to take the power in your hands and try to change people's lives." But then this very week, coincidentally, four days ago, just within the seven-day gap that the new amendment will allow people to avail themselves of, the DUP walked out of the Executive and now we do not have an Executive at all.

I hear a lot in this House about the precious Union and how this is all about the Union. Where is the Prime Minister or even his Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when a key part of that supposedly precious Union, the Executive of the devolved Administration of Northern Ireland, has collapsed? Nowhere to be seen is the Prime Minister of this precious United Kingdom. If I was a Unionist in Northern Ireland today—I can assure the House I am not—I would be looking very closely at how this Government treat them.

To be honest, I find it quite shocking we are in this position today. One of the things that has led us to this position is that the Prime Minister, the former Brexit Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland have been promising to trigger article 16 for months. Of course, the protocol was part of the withdrawal agreement that this Prime Minister negotiated, signed and told everybody was fantastic. But what is worse about all this is that the DUP actually believed him. I have a four-year-old who would not have believed him. It is astonishing that, after all of this, the DUP, which championed Brexit—it's all one United Kingdom referendum, we all have to leave together, we were told—*[Interruption.]* Then there was an opportunity—*[Interruption.]* Members really want to listen, Mr Deputy Speaker. Then there was an opportunity to stop a border in the Irish sea by voting for the whole of the United Kingdom to stay in the customs union and single market. The DUP rejected it. *[Interruption.]* I hear, "That wasn't Brexit." Well, maybe it is about time that the DUP chose between the purest version of Brexit and the Union they profess to love. Now we have a protocol that had to be put in place because the DUP and others forced the hand of a previous Prime Minister into ensuring there would be a border in the Irish sea. It was not as if this was a surprise. Many of us, people of a nationalist persuasion and people of no persuasion at all, were shouting it loudly on TV and on the radio to tell them: this is what is going to happen if you don't do something sensible about Brexit. We also have an opportunity. Let us get rid of most of the checks. Let us do it tomorrow. Let us have an SPS agreement with the European Union. The DUP reject that as well. How did they think this was going to end?

Now we have the DUP, who for months have held a gun to their own head, telling the British Government and the European Union, "If you don't get me what I want, I'll shoot." And now they have shot and what have they got? This will never precipitate the result they want because it is impossible to do what the DUP wants. That is the reality. This is not about the protocol; this is about an election that will come in the next few

[Colum Eastwood]

months. All this is about is shoring up the Unionist support. That is what every election in Northern Ireland is about. Let's get the people worried! Let's get them scared! Who is going to be First Minister? Who is going to be Deputy First Minister? The Union is at risk! Why not actually work to make the institutions work and persuade the people out there who are interested in this big constitutional debate that they actually should vote for the Union at some point? But everything that the DUP does makes my job easier and easier. I do not have to do anything to persuade people to vote for constitutional change. I just have to let the DUP speak, because everything it has done over the past five or six years has led to more support for the Union.

The real losers in all this are the ordinary people of Northern Ireland who are going through a health crisis—our waiting lists would embarrass a third-world country—and who are seeing rising gas prices. They want to see the climate change legislation, they want to see the welfare mitigations going through and they want to see the domestic violence and stalking legislation, but what the DUP wants to do is walk away from its responsibilities. I hear from Sinn Féin that it wants an election as soon as possible, never mind about getting all the legislation through. Surely we have to learn the lesson that politicians are elected to go to work, to be at their desk to deal with the problems, and to sit down and work together to solve the problems on behalf of the people. All we got from the DUP this week, and from Sinn Féin five years ago, is that they walk away if they do not get what they want. Well, look how it is going to end up. The waiting lists will be longer, the schools will continue to crumble and our young people will continue to emigrate. That is the legacy of those two parties running Northern Ireland over the last 15 years, and it is about time people looked for something different.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We will begin the wind-up speeches at 8.34.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): There is truth in the point made tonight that, almost five days into the crisis, the Prime Minister of this nation has not spoken. That is wrong. The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom ought to have spoken on Thursday evening about this issue. He should not shut up about it until the issue is resolved. These are his responsibilities. When we view a constitutional crisis through the prism of a divided community, which is what Northern Ireland is, we create suspicions and we raise concerns unless those matters are properly addressed. There is a fear among some people that the Conservative and Unionist party that governs this nation is actually an English nationalist party that is concerned not about a border in the Irish sea but about a red wall on the mainland island, and that that is what eats it up every single day. If that is this Government's only concern, they are betraying the Union and the Unionist people.

That is the reality of where we are this evening. It is obvious to all of us who have been warning about this crisis—whatever side of the divide we are on, whether nationalists, Unionists or whatever—that this was bound to come to a head. That is the unfortunate reality of what has happened.

Sir Edward Leigh: The hon. Gentleman is aiming his artillery at the wrong enemy. The truth is that this protocol and trade across Northern Ireland are no threat whatsoever to the integrity of the single market. This Government have done their level best to try to get trade flowing completely freely; it is the EU that is making it so impossible.

Ian Paisley: No one from that side of the House needs to lecture us about the support that this party and the people of Ulster have invested in this Government—no one. The only reason that GB has Brexit is the support that the Unionist people of Northern Ireland gave to the right hon. Gentleman's party. Let us make no mistake about that. The reality is that, if the Government had given a fair deal to all the people of the United Kingdom, we would not be debating this issue this evening and the institutions of Northern Ireland would not be teetering on the brink of collapse. I fear that, alarming as the situation is in Northern Ireland, this will not be easily brought back together. The comment made by the right hon. Gentleman, who is a close friend of mine, betrays a lack of understanding of how deep the hurt and the cut is in Northern Ireland this evening. That must be addressed urgently.

8.30 pm

There has been some talk about elections, and there will be an election. Frankly, the sooner the election comes along, the better, because until the May elections actually come we are going to limp from pillar to post. I say this to the Unionist people. In a matter of weeks, the power to determine the self-determination of their country will be in their hands, and sitting at home, splitting votes, not being unified, and going off on different tangents will do nothing to preserve the Union. However, if they do any of those things, Sinn Féin will happily step up, walk over and trample not only my rights but those of the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) and his party. We saw that at the weekend at the benevolent cemetery, where Sinn Féiners and republicans destroyed a memorial that mentioned the deaths of Irish nationals because those deaths were not good enough for them. That is what we will continue to see: Sinn Féin rising and trying to have what they did not get in 1918—a purple patch for republicanism.

Either we ensure that the people of Northern Ireland unite and fight against that—I encourage every single Unionist to get out in the coming election, put their divisions and different party loyalties behind them and ensure that Unionism continues to be the first party in Northern Ireland—or this nation is heading towards a referendum on the future of the Union. Whether that referendum is in Scotland or Northern Ireland first, I am afraid it is more than likely that unless Unionists get out in the election and fight and vote for the right party, there will be a campaign towards a united Ireland. [Interruption.] I am glad that the hon. Member for Foyle recently cited, and rightly so, that his mother would not vote for a united Ireland because of the NHS. I hope that people do start to recognise the benefits of this Union; otherwise, we will get into an awful handling that the Government will never be able to unravel.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): To resume his seat at 8.34 pm, I call Stephen Farry.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): I recently tabled an amendment on immediate commencement, so I am pleased that that has finally come to fruition. In the circumstances, I have a few extremely brief points to make. First, most people in Northern Ireland are not focused on the protocol—it is there in the background, and it does pose challenges—as their priorities are health, jobs, the cost of living and their children's education. That is where their focus lies and it is important that we fully represent that.

I fear that we are walking into an even bigger crisis after the next Assembly election. If people walk away from power sharing, they do so at their peril, because power sharing devolution is the only way in which Northern Ireland can be successfully governed. That is a clear lesson from history.

The protocol is the product of the Government's choices around the nature of Brexit. Pragmatic solutions are available if people want to work on them, but what is not available is delusions and fantasies about what is out there. If people want to walk back some of the choices made on Brexit, that is good. However, given the nature of Northern Ireland, there will always be a need for some form of special circumstances. Whenever you leave the single market and customs union, you draw a line on a map, and that will inevitably create some degree of friction, but we have a challenge and a choice to manage it.

Conor Burns: First, may I say to the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), that it is good to be opposite him in the Chamber this evening? I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions, which have, if I may gently say so, strayed slightly beyond the scope of the two amendments that we are debating.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose—*

Conor Burns: I ask the hon. Gentleman to bear with me.

I say to the shadow Secretary of State that the content of this legislation was set out a significant period of time ago. This has not been an emergency piece of legislation; in fact, it is very welcome that this is one of the first pieces of legislation dealing with Northern Ireland that has not been emergency legislation. The debate on the final stages of consideration of Lords amendments was timetabled for today some time ago, although I do concede that the amendments are landing in a period of political turbulence. It is worth remembering that Ministers remain in place, however, and the Assembly continues to sit and can make progress even in the context of the withdrawal of the First Minister and the consequential lack of a Deputy First Minister. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State issued a written ministerial statement on Friday calling for the DUP to reinsert the First Minister and get the Executive fully back and focusing.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) has rightly taken a huge interest in all this, not least because he was the author of New Decade, New Approach. On the question of the responsibility of ownership of the protocol and the checks, the operation of checks at the port is clearly a matter for the Northern Ireland Executive. The protocol is the consequence of an internationally negotiated

treaty, which is a responsibility of the United Kingdom Government as a whole. As he will understand, given the live court proceedings I am slightly constrained from saying too much more than that, but we were certainly not seeking in any way to abrogate responsibility.

I want to pick up on my right hon. Friend's point about charities. Yesterday afternoon, I was in Belfast Cathedral, St Anne's, as a guest of the Dean. I had gone before Christmas to join the collection of the Black Santa appeal, and I was there yesterday when those involved revealed that they had raised more than £150,000. Many of the charities who will benefit from that want the restoration of stable power sharing and a stable approach, as do the other people I met during the last few days in Northern Ireland.

Jim Shannon: Does the Minister of State accept that the people of Northern Ireland think they have been in a "call waiting" queue since 1 January 2021? They feel that their opinion has been undervalued and their voice has not been heard. Will the Minister give a commitment to ensuring that the Northern Ireland protocol is done away with, article 16 is initiated and the voice of the people of Northern Ireland is heard in this House and across the whole of Northern Ireland?

Conor Burns: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that article 16 and its triggering and doing away with the protocol are not the same thing. Triggering article 16 is a provision of the protocol; it does not remove the protocol.

I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) that we understand the destabilising impact of the protocol. The Government remain absolutely committed to resolving the issue of the protocol, the writing of which, by the way, recognises Northern Ireland's integral place in the internal market of the United Kingdom. I visited a shop in Lisburn before Christmas and was told that it had had to reduce its range of shortbread, because shortbread now requires a veterinary certificate as a result of the butter content. That was clearly not what we signed up to when we agreed to the protocol.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee—I will be very nice to him, because I am giving evidence to the Committee tomorrow—tempts us to legislate beyond the scope of what is in New Decade, New Approach. We have very deliberately decided to stay within the scope of what was agreed, because it was agreed by the political parties. That is certainly not to say that some of his suggestions are not without merit.

The hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) talked about the divided nature of society in Northern Ireland. I have to say—I say it in affection—that I think it was slightly superfluous of him to reassure and remind us that he was not a Unionist. He did say that this was all about the build-up to the election, and there was a bit of electioneering in the air, but I suppose that is understandable.

In the moments left to me, let me say that I returned this morning from five nights in Northern Ireland. I bookended my trip with a visit to Clonard monastery on the Falls Road, where I listened to an engaging talk with the Northern Irish boxer Carl Frampton, and with a moving service yesterday at St Matthew's on the

[Conor Burns]

Shankill Road, with a sermon from the Archbishop of Canterbury—all part of the 4 Corners festival, bringing together all that unites Belfast and, indeed, wider Northern Ireland—led by Father Martin Magill, a Catholic priest on the Falls, and the Rev. Tracey McRoberts, a Protestant clergywoman on the Shankill. I met businesspeople yesterday afternoon in Lisburn. I met a victims' group in Fermanagh. I talked to Ards, Banbridge and Craigavon council about levelling up. I went to the Ulster museum, where I saw the silent testimony of “The Troubles and Beyond” exhibition, a powerful and stark reminder of what happens when society in Northern Ireland goes backwards. These are modest proposals that improve the governance and flexibility in Northern Ireland, and I commend these amendments—

8.40 pm

One hour having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments, the debate was interrupted (Programme Order, this day).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83F), That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Question put and agreed to.

Lords amendment 1 accordingly agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker then put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83F).

Lords amendment 2 agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

IMMIGRATION

That the draft Passenger, Crew and Service Information (Civil Penalties) (Amendment) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 6 January, be approved.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

Question agreed to.

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

ANIMALS

That the draft Microchipping of Dogs (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 6 January, be approved.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (9 FEBRUARY)

Ordered,

That at the sitting on Wednesday 9 February, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents), the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on

(1) the Motion in the name of Secretary Priti Patel relating to Police Grant Report not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on that Motion, and

(2) the Motions in the name of Secretary Michael Gove relating to Local Government Finance not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the first such Motion or six hours after the commencement of proceedings relating to Police Grant Report, whichever is the later; proceedings on those Motions may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

Dentist Industry and NHS Backlogs

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(David T. C. Davies.)

8.41 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): All of us at some point will suffer from toothache. We would like to think that getting treatment through the NHS would be a relatively painless thing to achieve. Indeed, most of us have grown up with the thought that a regular check-up and work when it is needed is something we can access through our local NHS dentist, but in reality the presence of an NHS dentist in towns and villages has slowly been eroding, and charges have been in place for NHS dental treatment for some time, with only a limited number of people eligible for free treatment, including young children and those on very low incomes. The likelihood of being able to find a dentist who will do the work on the NHS is becoming more and more remote. The reasons that sit behind these changes and the necessary support needed to improve access to NHS treatment is the issue I want to raise in this debate with the Minister.

I know I am not alone in receiving correspondence on this topic, but hearing from constituents in Warrington South, reading their letters and trying to help them find a dentist has led me to the conclusion that the system needs radical changes. These problems are not all as a result of the pandemic, but it is worth saying that dentists are struggling in relation to their NHS contracts at the present time because of their experiences in recent months. NHS dental statistics show that only 12 million courses of treatment were carried out by general dentists in the year 2020-21, which is down almost 79% compared with the figure for the previous year.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The whole House will be grateful to my hon. Friend for raising an issue that matters to every Member of Parliament. Our local newspapers point out that trying to find a dentist is like trying to find a needle in a haystack. Most of us have fewer dentists than we had in 2017, and the sooner his encouragement brings about a big change in co-operation with the British Dental Association and individual dentists, the better it will be for our patients, many of whom have aching teeth.

Andy Carter: I thank the Father of the House for his intervention, and I agree with him—the needle in a haystack analogy is absolutely right. In my role as a local MP, I am representing both providers of dental treatment and patients who want to access that treatment. So I have tried to take time in the past couple of weeks to speak to dentists in my constituency about their experiences and how the system is operating today. Many of them have been providing NHS services for many decades.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this debate to the Chamber, because this is an important subject, not only for him, but for all of us. Does he agree that unless we have more support for the dental industry and for affordable dental care, this will not be possible for those who are working and not entitled to help yet who are struggling with the increased cost of living? Does he further agree that there is a dental catastrophe waiting to happen in the near future if we do not do something right now?

Andy Carter: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. That is the purpose of this debate: to highlight to the Minister the concern that I and other Members around the country have that NHS dentistry is on the brink and that there has to be radical change.

As well as talking to dentists, I have spoken to constituents who have written to me, completed an online survey that I placed on my website or messaged me directly following publicity in local newspapers about this debate. This topic matters not only so that people can access urgent treatment for toothache. More and more studies are confirming what dentists have always argued: that tooth decay and gum disease are increasingly linked to a heightened risk of serious health problems such as stroke, heart disease and diabetes. A healthy mouth is the gateway to a healthy body. Neglecting oral health can sabotage our long-term overall health. As the hon. Gentleman indicated, this topic really does matter to many, many people.

One of the first issues I want to highlight is the challenge people face when they move house. Finding NHS treatment can be almost impossible as a new resident in a location. I wanted to say, “getting on to a surgery’s list,” but it is clear from speaking to dentists that the notion of getting on to a list does not exist any more; there are no such things as dentists’ lists today.

In my quest to help residents, I have spoken to NHS England, Warrington clinical commissioning group and the regional dentists’ team. They have all pointed me to an NHS website that lists details of dentists who are accepting patients in my local area. The reality is that the website is massively out of date. In most cases, surgery information has not been updated for about two years. Despite being assured that there are dentists accepting new patients in Warrington, it is simply impossible to find them. As my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) indicated, it is like looking for a needle in a haystack.

On Friday, I had it confirmed by constituents I spoke to that NHS England could not provide them with the details of any dentist in Warrington, Cheshire or Merseyside who was accepting new NHS patients. They could provide details of emergency dental treatment services available in Manchester or Liverpool, but NHS England confirmed that no dentists are currently taking on new NHS patients across an area with a population of about 1.8 million people. I am afraid, Minister, that the signposting we are offering online is woeful and urgently needs to be updated.

In early January, I heard from many people living in Appleton, who had received notice from their local practice that after many years of providing NHS treatment, it would no longer be offering services through the NHS. On Friday last week, I met Paul and Paula Green, who have been patients at Appleton Park dentist surgery for many years. They are two of about 8,000 local people who received the notification that their provider was changing the way it offers services, and that the only way they could continue to get treatment at the local practice was to become part of a dental plan or to pay for their treatment. Mrs Green has been at the same surgery for about 50 years. In fact, the whole family are patients. They were suddenly informed that treatment provided by the NHS would no longer be available from the end of March. They will have to look further afield

[Andy Carter]

for a practice—there are no other practices in the village—and there is no guarantee that they will be taken on by any practice in Warrington, Cheshire or Merseyside.

Many of those 8,000 people will be left without an NHS dentist. Some could even be mid-treatment. They have paid their national insurance and their taxes, in many cases over many years, but now they cannot get NHS treatment. Understandably, they are pretty cross. They are cross with the dentist for making this change. They are cross with the regional NHS team. They are cross with me as their Member of Parliament. They are cross with the Government. They want to know what the Minister is going to do to help them find an NHS dentist who can look after their family's oral health.

Myriad factors are driving practices across the country to make such moves, and I will cover a couple of the main issues that I hear when I talk to owners and senior dentists across my constituency. One of the first issues I want to discuss is the need—much like in many other sectors—to bolster and boost skills. Dental practices stand or fall based on the quality of their people, and if a dental practice cannot recruit enough good staff with the right level of training, that practice obviously has a serious problem. However, unfortunately, research suggests that this is a common problem for small and medium-sized dental practices right across the UK. Most dentists are SMEs: they are run by a senior dentist, receiving payment from the NHS to provide services through an annual contract, which I will discuss in more detail shortly.

The problem is that the UK does not seem to be producing sufficient numbers of dentists with the skills that those SMEs need. On top of that, the difficulty with dentistry is that when people graduate, they tend to work where they qualify or where they live, and they are not necessarily going to dental schools in the north of England—in fact, most of the dental schools in this country are in the south or the midlands. We are simply not training enough people in the regions who want to become dentists, who want to take on those NHS contracts, and it is not sufficient to say that we pay trained professionals well. We seem to have a lack of supply and over-demand.

What is the sector looking for? By widening access and participation in training, the Government need to create more flexible entry routes, including for overseas dentists, as well as develop training places for dental professionals right across the UK. This is not just about dentists: it is about upskilling dental technicians and dental associates by providing them with more training, so that they can provide a greater range of services. There are many vacancies for salaried dentists available in the UK—anyone who searches online can find details in pretty much every town around the country—but the problem is particularly bad in small towns and villages across the north of England, and the ability to track new entrants into NHS roles is limited, particularly when dentists working in the private sector can earn much more than they do in the NHS.

There is also an immediate need for dentists from outside the European economic area, and we should be making much more of our fantastic links to the Commonwealth countries, where there is often a surplus of trained dentists. Will the Minister look to extend the General Dental Council's recognition of dental

qualifications to schools outside the EEA? When needed, candidates could work in a provisional registration period with close supervision and training for a year before registration with the GDC is granted, a measure already used for overseas doctors by the General Medical Council, but not currently employed by dentists. I ask the Minister to look at recruitment, with a target to increase the number of UK dentist training places and incentives for NHS dentists to move to areas where there is less access to NHS provision.

I mentioned the NHS contract earlier, and I want to move on to that topic now. One of the main points that I have heard from dentists is that urgent attention needs to be paid to the 2006 NHS dental contract. Without fail, every dentist I have spoken to has said that the current system of remunerating dentists purely on activity is simply not fit for purpose. It has received criticism from dentists; from Governments of both political persuasions; from the Health and Social Care Committee; from the chief dental officer for England and Wales; from the British Dental Association; from patient groups; from all the major providers of dentistry in the UK; and, I think, from numerous Health Ministers who want to see changes. I suspect that my hon. Friend the Minister also wants changes to be made to the dental contract.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): A dentist in my constituency, Matt Hooper, has contacted me several times regarding this matter. He says that morale in dentistry is extremely low at this moment in time, specifically due to the contracts that my hon. Friend is discussing. Does he agree that we really need to value our dentists? When most of us are going about our day-to-day business, we do not think twice about our dentists, but when we get toothache, all of a sudden they become our best friends. We need to make sure that they are there for us.

Andy Carter: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: many of the dentists I have spoken to say that working with these activity targets is like being on a treadmill. It wrongly puts the focus on meeting targets, rather than delivering the sort of patient care we need to be delivered in our dentists' surgeries.

On the back of receiving news from constituents who contacted me that a surgery in Appleton was to close, I went to see Dr Mansour Mirza, who runs Appleton Park dental surgery. He talked me through his decision to give notice to the NHS. He was handing back a contract worth hundreds of thousands of pounds which his practice had had for many years. I want to thank Dr Mirza for being so open and so frank with me about the decision that he had to take earlier this year. Providing the treatment that he is required to deliver under the contract just does not add up. It costs him more to provide the services than he is paid. No one can survive over the long term if that is the case, so it is hardly surprising that his contract, like many others around the United Kingdom, is being handed back to the NHS.

I am also grateful to David Flattery, a dentist who lives in Lymm and owns and manages a practice in Altrincham, for his insights. He says that the incentives to take on new NHS patients at his practice are slim to none, owing to the workload and the quotas that he has to meet under the "units of dental activity" system. When he explained how the system works, with units

attributed to particular types of treatment, I came away scratching my head. Dentists are effectively paid the same for delivering a check-up as they are for root canal work, although one of those procedures involves a tremendous amount more work than the other. That makes little sense.

The Minister will know that UDAs simply do not work, and it is time to replace the contract with a more modern system which reflects dentistry in the 21st century. Dr Miraz told me that his private work had been subsidising the NHS contract for many years, and that despite wanting to continue, he simply could not afford to provide the NHS services that he had signed up to. Shockingly, the regional NHS team did not seem to want to find a solution: they have simply left people without access to any NHS dentist.

There is a real fear that NHS dentistry will disappear in the months and years to come. Dentists want to do the job of dentistry. It seems from what I have heard about the experience of dentists working through the pandemic that the likelihood of having payment clawed back by the NHS has grown. In the current quarter, dentists need to deliver 80% of their contracted UDAs, at a time when the prevalence of covid and the omicron variant is at its highest point in the entire pandemic, but the targets that have been set for dentists have risen during that period. If patients cancel or staff are sick and dentists cannot deliver that 80% of UDAs, the dentists lose funding, which means that they cannot pay the salaries of their staff, meet the rent, or provide future services for children or those with the lowest earnings. I believe that dentists are conscientious and caring healthcare professionals. They want to treat their patients, but they also want to be treated fairly by the NHS. Mr Flatterly told me:

“If we really want to incentivise prevention, we need to see change urgently. ‘Incentives’ to just drill and fill is what the industry has been arguing against for many years.”

The latest NHS dental statistics show that in NHS Warrington clinical commissioning group, only 33.6% of child patients were seen by a dentist in the 12 months to June 2021, a fall from 54% patients the year before.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): My hon. Friend is advancing a compelling argument, and much of what he is saying rings true in Cornwall as well. One of my passions relates to childhood dentistry, or the lack of it. When we question the authorities in Cornwall, we often find that they are not entirely aware of the scale of the problem that they have. Many Cornish Members are currently conducting their own online dentistry survey.

When I was a child—I do not know whether other Members had the same experience—we used to have dental checks at school, and our parents were told if there was a problem. When I investigated, I was told that it was not necessary for a dentist to carry out the checks; a dental professional could do them, and a letter would then go home to the child’s parents. Would my hon. Friend support piloting such schemes again, particularly in deprived areas, along with preventive medicine to stop children needing to go to the dentist with serious problems in the first place?

Andy Carter: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. I spent Friday afternoon with a GP practice in Warrington South and heard from the doctor there

about the work that is now undertaken by nurse practitioners in the surgery and in the community. It seems sensible to me to upskill dental nurses to become dental nurse practitioners who can work in the community, and in schools in particular, to try to give guidance to parents to support families and to ensure that children’s dental health is a priority.

My hon. Friend identifies issues in child oral health. If we are not careful, we will store up an incredible problem for the future. We need to see it as a priority. The notion of having a six-month check-up has gone, for many good reasons, but many children are not seeing a dentist over a 12 month or even two-year period. We need to think carefully about that, so I absolutely support her point.

According to the NHS workforce study, 147 fewer dentists are working in the NHS in the north-west than in the previous year. In Warrington, there are 64 dentists per 100,000 of the population and we are seeing considerable falls on previous years.

In the long term, root and branch reforms need to be instigated in the dentistry sector. I hope that the Minister can explain what steps the Government are taking to increase training places in the north of England. I ask her to instigate a national recruitment drive to increase the number of people going to university to study dentistry and to introduce incentives for dentists to relocate to areas such as Warrington and to work in smaller practices where they provide an incredible service to local communities.

I ask the Minister about the new dental contract too. As I mentioned, I think most of the underlying problems in NHS dentistry spring from the fact that the current contract, which dates back to 2006, is not fit for purpose. It is inadequate and does not reflect the needs of dentists and their patients today. I hope that she can explain what steps she will take to bring forward a new contract and how she can work with dentists, patient groups and other interested parties around the country to ensure that the contract reflects what dentists and their patients need for the next decade. Does the Minister agree that we must break the idea of units of dental activity and ensure that NHS dentistry is available to all those who need it, as well as prioritising preventive care?

Finally, what can she say to my constituents, such as Paul and Paula Green, who have paid their national insurance contributions and paid their taxes but who, because of where they live in Warrington, can no longer get access to NHS treatment because nobody wants to provide a service through an NHS contract? I thank the Minister and look forward to hearing her reply.

9.3 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) on securing this important debate. Is it not amazing that when we have toothache or need some treatment, we go to these wonderful people, get an injection, lie back with our mouth open while they drill away, then stagger away with a numb jaw, and as we leave, we always say, “Thank you”? We say that because, as my hon. Friend said, they are doing us a great service and we appreciate them.

When I look at the most common issues in my digital postbag—my constituents write to me about health issues all the time—close to the top is dental care. The

[Giles Watling]

issue is widespread, as we all know, and in every corner of Britain, but I will briefly tease out some of the more shocking figures.

Some 85% of dental practices are closed to new NHS patients. Nearly half of patients are forced to get private treatment because of access problems. Every 10 minutes, a child is admitted to hospital for a tooth extraction—let us imagine the cost of that, let alone the trauma involved for the children. Some 1,000 clinicians have left the profession in the past year, with yet more significantly reducing their NHS hours. This is utterly unacceptable.

So we have the levelling-up policy. I welcome the levelling-up agenda, but I do not believe that we are all being levelled up in a fair manner. Areas such as Clacton, my constituency, are often considered to be rich and well-heeled because we fall into the wider eastern region, which is considered to be an economic powerhouse—and it is, but not necessarily on the coast. If we really want to level up public services for those suffering and at risk, we must consider areas such as Clacton when it comes to dental care. Let us ensure that levelling up follows the data and not just the rhetoric, and gives coastal communities the help they need.

There are two key areas we need to hit in an age of integrated care systems where we are devolving more and more power over primary and acute care to local leaders. I increasingly question the role of certain state monoliths such as NHS England and NHS Improvement. My constituents do not need more national mandarins; they need local, empowered leaders with devolved budgets. I reflect on my former clinical commissioning group and the outstanding leadership that it and its accountable officer, the brilliant Ed Garrett, provided locally. Clacton primary care is measurably in a much better state thanks to his and his office's work. Give local systems the commissioning powers and budget and we will level up in a local, focused and measurable manner. The primary care trusts have had their day. Local care leadership is now delivering. It is time for NHS England to be devolved in the same manner.

Let me move on to the workforce. Increasing the number of UK-trained dentists will help, but it will take at least six years to make that vital difference. Urgent action is now needed to increase places on the overseas registration exam, develop an adaptation programme, and recognise qualifications from top dental schools around the world. Our membership of the EU forced us to look away from people in areas like our wider Commonwealth who were being trained in first-class dental care. Now we could see more of those practitioners in areas such as Clacton, which would be the very Brexit dividend that we were promised. I am delighted that Clacton has been selected as a pilot area for such training courses, but clarity is needed on how existing budgets can be used to support it to improve dental access in my constituency. I hope the Minister can help me with this.

Levelling up is not just about expanding employment outside London, but must be about addressing inequalities wherever we find them, such as decreasing NHS dental care in coastal communities such as Clacton. We can do that by forcing cash and power out of NHS England alongside using our Brexit freedom to open the nation to the dentists of the world we have so long spurned.

9.7 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling). I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) for securing this debate on an important subject both for the country as a whole and for my constituents, because we are one of the coastal, rural communities badly affected by the lack of NHS dentists. Islanders are facing a serious dentistry issue. I have raised this with the previous Minister and the Secretary of State on a number of occasions. Frankly, it is now almost impossible to find an NHS dentist on the Island if you do not already have one. Some Islanders have written to me about having to go into the mainland as far as Surrey. That stretches a family budget, because we have some of the most expensive ferries on the planet, so it is a painful decision.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton said, 85% of dental practices across the country are closed to new patients, and seven out of 10 people find it difficult to access an NHS dentist. This does not only have immediate consequences such as toothache but is dangerous, because there will be a significant rise in oral cancer cases, which are increasing in the UK. In 2020, 2,700 Brits lost their lives to mouth cancer. The lack of dental appointments means that we will not be able to spot those cancers early on, so those figures are likely to increase. We had a case on the Isle of Wight of somebody who was sadly diagnosed late and then misdiagnosed, who now has untreatable cancer. We also know there is a correlation between gum disease and heart disease. There is no doubt that a significant knock on will feed through from the lack of appointments.

Dental practices were clearly facing challenges before covid, and it is, in part, a workforce challenge. The British Dental Association has found that 75% of dental practices are struggling to fill vacancies, on which I will make some suggestions shortly. More than half of NHS dentists under the age of 35 are thinking of leaving the NHS in the next five years, which is a potentially serious and significant problem that will only make the issues more acute. It is one reason why areas such as Clacton and the Isle of Wight are significantly suffering from a lack of NHS dentists.

I will not take up too much time, because so much has been said so eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South, but I conclude with some constructive suggestions. It would be great if the Minister could address some of them. If she cannot, and I understand that I am bouncing her into this, I would be grateful if she could write to me. I wrote to the Secretary of State on this issue a couple of months ago, and I know the Department is very busy, but I have yet to receive a reply.

First, we should introduce a section 60 order to increase the General Dental Council's discretion on recognising overseas dental qualifications. Secondly, we should develop a 12-month UK adaptation course for experienced, qualified overseas dentists to gain GDC recognition. Thirdly, we should maintain the mutual recognition of professional qualifications with European economic area countries indefinitely, and we should extend it to overseas territories, potentially as part of future free trade agreements.

Fourthly, and this is potentially the most important, we should fund a catch-up programme of overseas registration exams to make up for missed opportunities during the pandemic, with a view to recruiting 1,000 additional dentists within 12 months. This could specifically target the Indian subcontinent, which, according to all the dentists and dental experts I speak to, produces a very high standard of dentists and overproduces the number of dentists it needs. We are not talking about depriving another country of its dentists; we are talking about getting a job lot of 1,000 subcontinent dentists who speak English and who are very well trained. Some of them will be eager to work in this country, and we will get them here now.

Fifthly, we should introduce an expedited six-month performers' list validation by experience programme for candidates with more than 1,500 hours of dental experience. Finally, we should accelerate changes to dental therapists' scope of practice to allow courses of treatment without prescription from a dentist.

Others have spoken eloquently about the need to change the contract, so I am focusing on how, in the short and medium term, we can dramatically increase the number of dentists in this country. All these ideas were suggested to me by the Association of Dental Groups because, like others I have spoken to about this, it thinks they could be brought in relatively quickly and could have a reasonable, and potentially significant, impact in the next 12 months.

These are not unreasonable requests and, as we all have in this debate, I stress that the NHS was established on three significant and unalienable principles: that it meets the needs of everyone; that it is free at the point of delivery; and that it is based on clinical need, not the ability to pay. Certainly with NHS dentistry, we are struggling. We see that not only in kids' and adults' teeth being untreated but in serious diseases not being recognised as a result, potentially costing us far more not only in lives but in the money spent when cases come in as an NHS emergency, rather than as dental treatment that should be part and parcel of everyone's rights in this country.

9.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) on securing the debate and on raising such an important issue. I answered another Monday Adjournment debate on dentistry recently, and on Thursday there will be another debate on it in Westminster Hall, so it is obviously a significant issue for many hon. Members across the House. I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for Clacton (Giles Watling) and for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for raising issues on behalf of their constituents.

I am not going to stand here and say that there is not an issue around dentistry, because there absolutely is—it has been significantly affected by the pandemic. I will touch first on the short-term problems that the pandemic has created for dentistry and for patients, before going on to the longer-term problems around the contract, which my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South raised and which have existed for a significant time.

A significant backlog has been created during covid. The majority of dental procedures are aerosol-generating, so covid creates a significant risk both for patients and for dental teams. When the lockdown measures initially came into force, only urgent dental procedures were allowed to go ahead. It was not until 8 June 2020 that non-urgent procedures were allowed, and only 20% of normal activity was allowed to go ahead at the time because of infection control measures. Even at that stage, we could see that a significant amount of work was backing up.

For most of last year, dental teams were allowed only up to 40% of normal activity. It was not until the end of last year that they could go up to 65%, and just around Christmas time that they were able to go up to 85% of normal activity. Even today, they are still not allowed to go back to 100% of normal activity, simply because infection control measures make it important that space, intervals between patients and cleaning between patients continue.¹ Even with dentists working at pace and as hard as they can, a backlog is still accumulating nearly every day because those measures are in place.

Andy Carter: I thank the Minister for setting out very clearly how dentists have come back to operate in their surgeries. As she mentions and as I said in my speech, dentists were asked just before Christmas to deliver 85% of the UDAs for the three-month period from January to March. A number of small dentistry practices operating with one or two people are saying that we have increased the amount that they are required to deliver in order to be paid, at a time when covid is at its highest with the most infections ever. If a staff member, dentist or patient is unable to attend, the risk that the dentist will not be able to deliver is very significant, which means that they could be financially penalised. Does the Minister understand that the way the contract has been set up can really work against the current timeframe?

Maria Caulfield: I absolutely have a lot of sympathy for dentists. It is due to their and their teams' hard work that, since December 2020, urgent care is back to pre-pandemic levels. I reassure my hon. Friend that when we were at 20%, 40% and 65%, dentists were getting paid 100% of their contract value; it is only since the Christmas period, when we went to 85%, that they have not been paid the full 100%. Throughout most of the pandemic, even though they were seeing fewer patients than their contract allowed because of infection control measures, they were getting 100% of their contract value.

Andy Carter: I understand what the Minister says. The way dentists are paid is not that dissimilar to the way MPs are paid: they get a chunk of money and have to pay their rent and pay their staff, as they have had to do all the way through the period. If they get to the point where they are required to deliver 85%, but where covid and the infection levels mean that they cannot physically deliver it because they are not there, they still have all those outgoings—they still have to meet their contractual requirements to pay the rent and pay their staff. That is the issue that I think many dentists are very concerned about.

Maria Caulfield: I take my hon. Friend's point of view, but during the pandemic there has been significant support that many other sectors did not get. That is not

[Maria Caulfield]

to detract from the problems that dentists are facing, however, and no one is a bigger supporter of dentists than I.

I will just move on to some of the other points that my hon. Friend raised. We are not up to 100% of pre-pandemic activity simply because of covid, and that is taking a toll on access to NHS dentistry. A number of patients have waited and waited during the pandemic and now need urgent care, and we are seeing that reflected in A&E attendance and in surgical elective lists, because patients have got to a stage where they need surgery to rectify some of their problems.

I fully take on board many of the issues that have been raised in the debate this evening, but I reassure colleagues that we are trying to support dentistry as much as possible. NHS England is providing local commissioners with help and support to direct patients to where there is availability. It may have been my hon. Friend who mentioned this, but dentists have been asked recently to update their information on the NHS website that records where NHS dentists are, so that we can direct patients to those surgeries that are taking patients. Dentists have also been asked to operate a cancellation list, so that, should someone pull out, the next person on the list is proactively contacted to be offered that appointment. It is difficult for patients to navigate the system and find out where NHS dentists are.

Members may be aware—I hope they are—that just a few days ago, a one-off additional £50 million was secured for NHS dental services, the first pot of money that they have received in a long time. It is specifically focused on this financial year, so it has to be spent by April. It is targeted at those NHS dental teams to ask them what availability they have in increasing capacity, so that those waiting for treatment can start to access some of it. My hon. Friend's area in the north-west has been allocated £7.3 million to be spent by April. NHS England is working at pace with local commissioners to deliver that and to try to tackle some of the backlog.

The difference between that funding and the contract is that the rates of pay are significantly different, and we are seeing huge uptake from dentists who are keen to do NHS work when they are rewarded accordingly. That additional £50 million will secure up to 350,000 additional dental appointments and will be targeted at those in most urgent need of dental treatments, whether it is oral pain, disease or infections, to help them get the care they need. Children, who a couple of Members mentioned, are being prioritised, as are other vulnerable groups. We are seeing some take-up of that offer, and I hope that shortly we will be able to update colleagues on where exactly that take-up has happened and the difference it has made in accessing NHS dental provision.

I will move on to some of the longer-term dental issues, which have been eloquently set out this evening.

Bob Seely: I do not want to interrupt my hon. Friend as she goes on to these important long-term structural issues. There were a bunch of short-term ideas to get dentists into this country in the next year or two to help with the immediate crisis and the lack of NHS dentists. Can she assure us that she and her Department are looking at some of those options, rather than looking purely at the long term?

Maria Caulfield: If my hon. Friend will allow me, I will touch on some of those measures, too. If we move on from just the covid-related problems that have fallen on dentistry, there is no doubt that the UDA method of contract payments is a perverse disincentive for dentists. The more they do, the less they seem to be paid. I for one certainly do not underestimate the problems that that causes dentists, and I can see why many hand back their NHS contracts.

That is why we have started work on dental contract reform. I am meeting the BDA again tomorrow, and officials are starting contract negotiations, looking at both short-term change, which may give some immediate relief, and long-term reform of the contract, because that is the nub of the problem as to why dentists are not coming forward to take on NHS work, or are handing back their contracts because they no longer want to do NHS work. At the moment, the contract simply does not value the work that dentists do, and I want to reassure hon. Members that we are working as fast as we can to reform it and to make improvements.

We also need to work with local commissioners, because the feedback that we get is that some parts of the country are much better at commissioning local dentistry services than others. That is something we need to address, and part of how the £50 million is spent across the regions will be about helping us to identify those areas that need more support in commissioning services.

Our joint aim is to make patient access better and to reduce health inequalities for patients, while making the NHS a more attractive place for dentists to work. Making NHS dentistry more attractive to professionals will help with recruitment and retention and will provide us with NHS dentists across England. Hon. Members may be aware that Health Education England published its "Advancing Dental Care" review report in September last year and is working to implement the proposals to reform dental education over the next four years. The aim is to modernise training and education and to widen access to and participation in training to ensure that not just dentists are coming through the system but a whole range of dental professionals can be more effectively used in NHS dentistry. Legislative changes may be needed to upskill dental nurses, dental technicians and dental associates, and we are looking at whether we can tackle that later this year so that it is not just dentists who are able to do a significant amount of work. There are highly skilled, highly educated and highly experienced professionals working in dentistry who we could upskill and use to provide more dental support.

Although we are keen to expand dental training, the results of the establishment of new dental schools in regions or the training of more dentists would not necessarily be seen for four to five years. That is not to say that we will not do those things, but there are some immediate solutions, one of which is to create centres of dental development in localities where there is a shortage of provision and we can bring together education and services. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South is right that not just dentists but GPs are more likely to stay where they train, so it is important that we look at where the shortages are and try to bring centres of dental development to those areas.

The Government recognise, as my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight pointed out, that the registration process for some internationally qualified dentists can be bureaucratic and inefficient. The overseas registration exam that currently has to be taken was suspended throughout covid. The first exams took place last week, so some overseas dentists are starting to take their exams. The sessions booked in for the rest of the year will cover roughly 700 overseas dentists. They may not all pass the exam, but at least they are starting to get through the system.

The Department is currently working with the GDC on legislative proposals that will allow greater flexibility to expand on the registration options that are open to international dentistry applicants. My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight is right that some experienced qualified dentists currently cannot practise in this country. I am pleased to say that the consultation on the changes with the GDC launched today. Subject to the results of that consultation, we hope to bring forward changes

later this year. That will really open up dentistry to those who trained overseas. That is not to say that they will choose to work in the NHS once they qualify, but we are working on plans to encourage as many of them to do so as possible.

Although I am unable to present a quick fix to the House, I hope I have been able to reassure colleagues not only that we are working through short-term measures in respect of covid to open up dentistry and to get on top of the backlog created by covid, but that the long-term plans in respect of dental contract reform, training measures and the opening up of access for overseas dentists will increase access to NHS dental services and hopefully open up access for patients throughout the country.

Question put and agreed to.

9.30 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 7 February 2022

[MARK PRITCHARD *in the Chair*]

Laboratory Animals: Animal Welfare Act

4.30 pm

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind Members to observe social distancing and to wear masks.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 591775, relating to laboratory animals and the Animal Welfare Act.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. This petition closed on 20 January and attracted more than 110,000 signatures, including 139 from my constituency. Leading this debate today fills me with a sense of déjà vu. Just over three months ago, I led a debate in which this House considered two petitions relating to animal testing. One called for all animal testing in the UK to be banned and the other for a phasing out of animal experiments. In that debate, I quoted an early scholar of jurisprudence, Jeremy Bentham, who said,

“Why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive being?”

Here I stand again, repeating the very same question that has been brought to the fore by this petition, which calls for legislation to include laboratory animals in the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

To give some background, I must point out that the Animal Welfare Act is 16 years old. Within it is an unnecessary suffering clause, which sets out the criteria for an offence to be committed. It includes the principle that any action—or indeed failure to take action—that results in animal suffering must be against a protected animal. The petition highlights that laboratory animals are not protected by the 2006 Act and are therefore victims of unnecessary suffering.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): While I acknowledge that there remains a need for animal testing in some areas of medicine, current legislation negates any need to urgently move away from unnecessary procedures or experiments. Does the hon. Member agree that the Government need to apply greater pressure for alternative methods to be used?

Martyn Day: I thank the hon. Member for making that point. The fact that we know that 90% of animal experiments do not bring any real benefit tells us that we need to move very quickly in the opposite direction. I would favour a full ban on animal experimentation, because we could be better using the alternatives.

It strikes me as unbelievable that, in this nation of professed animal lovers, laboratory animals are categorically excluded from the 2006 Act. We must not forget that that includes dogs and cats, who many of us take into our homes to love and care for and who enrich our lives.

Therefore, by default, the 2006 Act endorses laboratory animals undergoing what can only be deemed as necessary suffering.

The Government response to the petition confirms that. It states:

“There is an explicit exclusion under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (AWA), to provide for the legitimate conduct of procedures on ‘protected animals’ for scientific or educational purposes that may cause pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm.”

In other words, the 2006 Act legalises, for example, the daily force feeding of chemicals directly into the stomachs of factory farmed puppies without pain relief or anaesthetic. Will the Minister enlighten us about the scientific or educational purpose fulfilled by that particular procedure?

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I entirely agree with my hon. Friend’s points. Beagle puppies are no less sentient than any other animal. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is horrendous that, in this day and age, the beagles are also used for their blood and reportedly have plasma drained from them while still alive, causing unnecessary suffering?

Martyn Day: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend’s comments. I will come on to that shortly. It is an absolutely abhorrent practice.

More importantly, perhaps the Minister can give reasons to assist us all in understanding why this procedure, which is classified as mild suffering under Home Office licensing, cannot be replaced with human-based research.

At this point, I will say a few words about the man who started the petition, Peter Egan, who hoped to be here with us but had to tend to an animal care event at home; I am sure we all extend our best wishes for a positive outcome. Many will be familiar with Peter as an excellent actor who is well known for bringing characters to life on our television screens. What may be less well known is that Peter is also the patron of the science-based campaign, For Life On Earth.

I met Peter and the For Life On Earth founder and director, Louise Owen, ahead of the debate, and Peter informed me of the abject horror he and others experienced while visiting a foie gras farm in France. For the sake of clarity, foie gras is defined as the liver of a duck or goose, fattened by force-feeding. I certainly do not want to stand accused of speciesism, but I can only imagine the compounding horror that force-feeding puppies would generate. That is why we all need to know what reasons can justify such acts. How can such acts be acceptable to a Government who rightly acknowledge that animals can experience feelings and sensations, and are in fact currently legislating to recognise that in the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill?

This is an appropriate juncture to raise early-day motion 175, on a public scientific hearing on animal experiments, tabled last June by my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) and supported by 104 cross-party Members. It is relevant to note that the EDM was remarked on by myself and others during the October debate. It commends the introduction of the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill, which will enshrine in law that animals can experience feelings and sensations. It also highlights that legislation’s

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connection with For Life On Earth's revelation that intensive breeding of laboratory dogs was taking place in the UK, and noted

"that scientists in the wider scientific community, outside the animal-based research sector, openly acknowledge the failure of animal testing in the search for human treatments and cures".

Margaret Ferrier: I thank the hon. Member for being so generous in giving way a second time. Gene-based medicine is a rapidly developing science that allows treatment to be completely personalised based on a patient's DNA. That could not be replicated through animal experimentation. Does the hon. Member agree that this kind of medical science must be prioritised when it comes to research, to avoid unnecessary harm to animals?

Martyn Day: I agree entirely. That form of medicine is better not only for animals but for humans as well.

Consequently, early-day motion 175 called on the Government to urgently

"mandate a rigorous public scientific hearing, judged by independent experts from the relevant science fields, to stop the funding of the now proven failed practice of animal experimentation and increase funding for state-of-the-art human-based research, such as human-on-a-chip and gene-based medicine, to prioritise treatments and cures for human patients and stop the suffering of laboratory dogs and other animals."

I hope this is not viewed as a separate matter, because it is undoubtedly related. After all, the UK remains the top user of primates and dogs in experiments in Europe. The petition reminds us that a recent exposé showed harrowing footage of the factory farming of laboratory dogs in the UK. Statistics for 2020 reveal that 4,320 procedures were carried out on dogs, and of these, 4,270 procedures were carried out on beagles, the preferred breed for experiments due to their size, docility and submissive nature, meaning that they take less effort and expense to house and are easy to experiment on. In other words, they are easy prey.

Dr Cameron: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; he is being extremely generous. Does he agree with me and those in the all-party parliamentary dog advisory welfare group that we really must find the time and place for this scientific hearing? There are alternatives, and those who engage in the experiments should not shy away from a scientific hearing, because we will hear from the experts who can take this issue forward. Surely the Government should also support an urgent scientific hearing as a way forward.

Martyn Day: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful point. Why should we be frightened of a fact-based approach? As well as repeated forced feeding, they are forced to inhale substances for between 28 and 90 days to measure the effects of repeat exposure on the liver, kidneys, lungs, heart and nervous system.

Some animals are also bred to be bled, as has been mentioned previously, with a facility granted permission to drain them of their blood so that it can be sold to customers for the benefit of biomedical science. Guidelines state that blood in studies must be as fresh as possible—meaning that it is taken from a living donor. Despite having a tube down their throats to aid breathing, the

pups are often given no sedation or anaesthetic while they are bled, as this provides the customers with advantageous drug-free blood.

In 2017, 1.81 million non-genetically altered animals that were bred for scientific procedures were killed or died without being used in procedures—shocking. I would share in the petitioner's gratitude if the Minister will provide an update on the petition's request for a rigorous, public, scientific hearing to take place.

The Government's response to the petition goes on:

"The use of animals in scientific research remains a vital tool in improving our understanding of how biological systems work both in health and disease. Such use is crucial for the development of new medicines and cutting-edge medical technologies for both humans and animals, and for the protection of our environment."

I disagree with that, as there is nigh on 20 years of scientific evidence demonstrating the medical failures of animal testing. It is evidence that comes from *The BMJ*, the National Cancer Institute and ScienceDirect, which is said to be the world-leading source for scientific, technical and medical research. Indeed, when ScienceDirect asked if it was time to rethink our current approach, over two years ago, it cited the questioning of animal models' reliability in predicting human responses as far back as 1962. Yes—60 years ago. Are the Government just not listening? Perhaps the Minister will explain to us why that long-standing, peer reviewed and reputable scientific research is being ignored.

The Government response goes on to say:

"The Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 (ASPAs) is the specific piece of legislation which provides protection for these animals... No animals may be used under ASPA if there is a validated non-animal alternative that would achieve the scientific outcomes sought."

I feel a sense of déjà vu, again. ASPA is 36 years old, yet it is repeatedly referred to in Government responses relating to matters around animal testing. It seems that the Government are not actually listening, because so-called "non-animal alternatives that would achieve the scientific outcomes sought"

have been brought to their attention many times before. As I have just mentioned, scientists have been challenging the reliability of animal testing predicting human responses for decades.

Here are just a few recent occurrences of non-animal alternatives being brought to this Government's attention: they were highlighted in the animal testing debate that took place last October; they were featured in the animal testing debate that took place last December; and they were raised in the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill debate that took place on 18 January this year. In last month's debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) remarked that there are areas of the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill that the SNP believes must be strengthened. Conspicuously, one of those areas is scientific procedures involving animals.

It is mind-boggling that despite clear acknowledgment from the UK Government that animals can experience feelings and sensations, despite them introducing "landmark legislation" that will recognise animals as sentient beings in UK law and despite them establishing an expert committee to ensure that animal sentience is considered as part of policy making, the UK Government still "others" laboratory animals as if they are unaware, unperceptive, and unconscious to harrowing experimentation. It is

also mind-boggling that laboratory animals are not only excluded from the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill that is currently in Committee, but also by outdated legislation that ignores them. In fact, it sanctions the otherwise illegal act of experimenting on protected animals and causing them, as set out in the regulated procedures of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986,

“a level of pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm equivalent to, or higher than, that caused by the introduction of a needle in accordance with good veterinary practice”.

Of course, the reality of animal experimentation is far more severe than what is described in the regulated procedures of the 1986 Act. Take, for example, the hideous procedures I have already mentioned, or the legislation classifying the force-feeding of factory-farmed puppies as “mild suffering”. Indeed, in the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill debate on 18 January, my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith highlighted that, legally, laboratory animals can be:

“poisoned with toxic chemicals, shot, irradiated, gassed, blown up, drowned, stabbed, burned, starved, or restrained to the point at which they develop ulcers or heart failure. They can have their bones broken or their limbs amputated. They can be subject to inescapable electric shocks, driven to depression, deprived of sleep to the point of brain damage, or infected with diseases.”—[*Official Report*, 18 January 2022; Vol. 707, c. 252.]

Section 24 of the 1986 Act makes it a criminal offence for information on what goes on behind closed doors at UK animal testing sites to be disclosed. As the law blocks access to information about the treatment of animals during experiments, it is currently shrouded in secrecy.

Related to these appalling occurrences, I was contacted by the Naturewatch Foundation ahead of today’s debate. On its behalf, I will take this opportunity to highlight that the Animals in Science Regulation Unit has not publicly published an annual report since 2018. Those reports are important sources of information about non-compliance, and often indicate where animal welfare issues have been detected. Will the Minister commit to releasing the 2019 and 2020 reports without delay, and to releasing the 2021 report within the first half of this year?

In these times of advanced medical knowledge and gene-based medicine, the Government believe the outdated 1986 Act provides specific protection for laboratory animals. Indeed, as well as the Government referring to it as such in their response to this petition, the ministerial response to the October animal testing debate said of this legislation:

“protection of animals on the basis of their sentience is the very principle established in the legal framework.”—[*Official Report*, 25 October 2021; Vol. 702, c. 43WH.]

I am sure I will be corrected if I have misinterpreted, but I understand that the petitioners do not agree with that appraisal. They would instead argue that this legislation is the means to causing unnecessary suffering of animals because, in effect, it legalises experimentation on protected animals.

However, it is not just the animals that this archaic legislation framework is failing. The petition reminds us that

“Experiments on such dogs, and other animals, are today widely reported to be entirely failing the search for human treatments and cures.”

Currently, there is enough evidence showing that there are better, more accurate and humane methods than resorting to animal testing.

For example, in 2020, in response to UK Government statistics showing no meaningful decline in UK animal experiments in a decade, despite a Government pledge, Humane Society International UK’s biomedical science advisor, Dr Lindsay Marshall, who managed a laboratory dedicated to animal-free research into respiratory diseases for 12 years, said:

“The UK cannot expect to have world-leading science innovation whilst we rely on failing animal-based research methods that are rooted in the past. In drug discovery, pharmaceutical safety, chemical testing, cancer research, the data shows that animal models are really bad at telling us what will happen in a human body. As well as sometimes being dangerously misleading, animal approaches typically take a really long time to produce results, sometimes years, are very expensive, and of course cause enormous animal suffering. As the UK leaves the EU and competes with countries like the USA that are taking bold strides towards animal-free science, we urge the government to radically update its 2010 research policy to focus on replacing animal procedures in science. Incentivising researchers to adopt new approaches is as easy as redirecting public research funding towards cutting-edge non-animal techniques based on human biology.”

I would wholeheartedly agree with those views.

The Government’s response to this petition concludes that they have

“no plans to amend the Animal Welfare Act (2006)”

even though, in this technological age, we have exceptionally accurate non-animal research methods, which can more effectively develop human therapies. That is simply wrong-headed.

Five years ago, the Dutch Government announced plans to phase out animal use for chemical safety testing by 2025, and they are well on track to achieve that goal. In September 2019, the United States Environmental Protection Agency pledged to “aggressively” reduce animal testing, including by removing requirements and funding for experiments on mammals by 2035. Belgium’s Brussels-Capital Region effectively banned animal testing on cats, dogs and primates from 2020. By January 2025, it will also ban animal use in education and safety testing unless it is deemed absolutely necessary.

However, Home Office data show that the total number of procedures involving specially protected species—dogs, cats, horses and primates—in Great Britain has increased over the last decade from 16,000 in 2011 to 18,000 in 2020. That is the case even though developments in evolutionary and developmental biology and genetics have significantly increased scientists’ understanding of why animals have no predictive value for the human response to drugs or the pathophysiology of human diseases.

I have asked this before and I will ask it again today. Do the Government have the courage to step into the 21st century and urgently consider enshrining in law other viable options for scientific research that do not involve animal suffering? They can do that by changing the law to include laboratory animals in the Animal Welfare Act. It is not too late to right this wrong. I urge the Government to seize this chance and avoid being judged by posterity to have missed a golden opportunity to end a failed practice. I hope the Minister will agree that, for a nation of animal lovers, denying laboratory animals their rights is wrong and immoral. I politely

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request and hope that I am not subjected to the same feeling of déjà vu in a few months' time if no further progress has been made.

4.52 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for his very powerful opening speech.

This is a very important debate on the welfare of animals subject to research. In preparing my comments for today's debate, I looked into the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and its definition of unnecessary suffering and what the guidance is in relation to people who are taken to court for that, and into the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986—ASPAs—and the way it regulates research on laboratory animals around the three R's of replacement, reduction and refinement, and the cost-benefit analysis. I was going to prepare a speech looking at those two different frameworks, the pros and cons, and utilitarian-based ethics around necessary suffering and so on, but it strikes me that the core title of this petition is very much not about the specific frameworks by which research on animals takes place, but rather about whether there should, can or could be animal research full stop and the justification for animal research in its entirety, through whatever regulatory framework is put in place to minimise animal suffering. It is on those points and the more existential question, "Should we have animal research or not?", that I will focus.

I wish—I think we all wish—that we did not need animal research. And of course, when it takes place, we want to avoid all animal suffering if at all possible. I do not think anyone in this room wants animals to suffer. But the sad truth is that we need animal research. There are situations in which it is essential and in which its likely benefit is clear. In terms of justifying it, I will focus on two areas, the first of which is research for human benefit. I do think there is evidence to show that animal research is very important, particularly in transgenic animals, in looking at disease models for diseases such as Alzheimer's and in the development of new drugs.

I can give a topical example from a few weeks ago: I think we will all have seen the story about the person who got a transgenic heart from a pig. It would not be possible to develop transgenic animals for organs for human transplantation without research into animals. I cannot see the future of medicine, particularly the exciting stuff such as xenotransplantation to treat diseases, without the use of experiments on animals.

Dr Cameron: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Spencer: I am very happy to take interventions if I am wrong about that and someone wants to correct me.

Dr Cameron: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the way that he has approached the debate. He clearly wants to look at the evidence base, which is incredibly powerful and important. Does he agree, however, that to get to the bottom of whether the alternatives are sufficient in today's world, a scientific hearing of expert opinion is called for? That is something that we in this House should all support to move forward.

Dr Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks. The issue is not the general principle but the specifics. As with the example of xenotransplantation that I just gave, one can produce lots of specific examples in which the cost-benefit analysis under the ASPA is probably justified. I am sure that there are lots of specific examples—including the harrowing examples I heard from the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk—where, at face value, I might wonder, "How on earth can that be justified?" The argument is more about how the ASPA operates as opposed to whether it should or should not exist. That system should be properly enforced and enable proper scrutiny of decisions based on the cost-benefit analysis for specific research programmes.

The need for animal research is not limited just to human disease. I will give an example that is close to my heart: the Animal and Plant Health Agency. Its headquarters are in my constituency and are known as the Weybridge research site even though, ironically, they are actually situated in New Haw. It is worth looking at what the APHA is doing. It published data on the animal research that it does. It has 32 badgers, which are used to look into the control of tuberculosis; 724 cattle, which are used for research into foot and mouth disease, among other things, to benefit global animal health; 439 domestic fowl, the majority of which are used for avian influenza programmes; 69 ferrets to look into avian influenza and covid-19; 221 pigs, again to look at foot and mouth; and 65 sheep and goats to work on parasitology, to protect animal health.

Some of that research is directly beneficial to tackling disease in animals. It is worth remembering the impact that those diseases have on animals. I am sure that many people in this room remember when, in 2001—I was in my early 20s—6 million cows and sheep were culled to give protection from disease during the foot and mouth outbreak. More recently, 15 million mink were culled in Denmark in response to the covid pandemic. When that news came out a couple of years ago, I found it very upsetting. Anyone who knows animals from the Mustelidae family—weasels, otters and ferrets—knows that they are not stupid creatures. They are amazing, highly intelligent animals. Fifteen million are gone, just like that, because of the covid pandemic.

If we are going to take a utilitarian ethics argument, the research done into animal health, and the numbers of animals that research involves, are a drop in the ocean compared with the number of animals who are suffering, who have suffered, or who I worry will suffer, because of animal diseases. Without the ability to do animal research that is correctly regulated with strong welfare protections, we are doing animals a disservice in terms of their future health and the prevention of disease.

Although we all want to live in a world in which animal research is not needed, and we all want to improve animal welfare, the sad truth is that we need that research. I believe that the ASPA provides strong and robust animal protections, and I disagree that we should scrap it and move into a non-animal research world.

I said that there is one caveat. I was persuaded by some of the opening remarks, particularly when it comes to certain types of animals. I think stronger arguments can be made in the case of primates and great apes—chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans. For

a long time I have believed they should have protections above other animals, and I would support calls for a sliding-scale approach to animals. I would have stronger protections for primates and great apes in animal research, and also in general welfare.

5 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, for what I think is the first time. I thank the Petitions Committee for tabling today's petition debate. Indeed, 176 petitioners came from my constituency.

As we debate the petition, we must remember that the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill is currently working its way through the House of Commons, after having successfully made its way through the House of Lords, in recognition of the importance of animal sentience, including that of all vertebrates, cephalopod molluscs and decapod crustaceans. The Bill will mean that a committee will produce a report on the impact of Government policy, and the Government will in turn respond to said report, adding another layer of protection to safeguard the interests of animals. It will be interesting to hear from the Minister how that will intersect with the current protections around laboratory research.

We have heard shocking stories today about the welfare of animals. When researching for this debate, I, too, came across those stories. We recognise there is a loophole that we must address in the Animal Welfare Act when it comes to scientific research for medicine and veterinary care. We must ensure that there is a comprehensive framework.

Although significant work was undertaken through the three R's strategy to replace, reduce and refine research, it is truly shocking that there were 3.4 million experiments in 2019. In 2020, it dropped to 2.8 million because of the pandemic, but there have been experiments on dogs, cats, rabbits, guinea pigs, ferrets, rats, monkeys, goats, sheep, mice, chickens and fish, and we have heard so much more. Of those experiments, 100,000 caused pain—50,000 caused severe pain—and that is something that we as parliamentarians must be mindful of in this debate.

We must also remember that 92% of experiments are unsuccessful. In addition, 1.8 million laboratory animals are bred and then killed each year without experimentation because they are deemed to be surplus. So 5.2 million animals are experimented on and killed. Plus there is the 10.7 million in the European Union and the massively underestimated 800,000 in the United States. In the global scientific community, we have to work closer together.

In parallel, the investment and focus on non-animal testing practices through the UK road map means that sophisticated science can steer us away from animal experimentation, so we do not have to continue on the path that we have journeyed on to date. We need to pivot to the new world of science that is developing at such a rapid pace.

Turning to the stats again, if 1.8 million animals are not used, and 92% of experiments fail to translate, of the 3.4 million, we already see a total of 4,928,000 animals adding nothing to research now, and just 272,000 offering some insight, but often experiments are repeated multiple times, so that, too, could be cut immediately.

Worse is the dependency of science on these dead ends, because it wastes valuable time and resources and does not find the cures that we are desperate to find. For the scientific benefit that it brings, it takes us down lost roads, which is why we need to pivot to the new scientific age of the technologies that are available to us—3D technology, cell-level technologies, advanced imaging, and the new scientific methodologies being developed for the new research techniques. Investing in those for the longer term will not only bring resource into vital areas of research but enable us to develop the science to find the cures that will make a difference to people's lives and, no doubt, to animals' lives as well.

I doubt that anyone present wants to see a slowing in the advancement of medicine. Everyone sees the importance of accelerating medical research. For that reason, I make this case today. It is especially vital in the light of the slowing of research during covid. We know that vital scientists have left the field and that the medical research charities did not have the support that they needed. Therefore, we have seen the slowing of the science of many rare conditions, cancers and so much more. We need to accelerate the pace of that science and, as we do so, investment should be made in the technologies of the future, ensuring that our labs are well equipped and that the technology is there.

We want to be the country to lead the global community of science. This is our opportunity to pivot to the new world. We should also see this as a major export opportunity, an opportunity to attract the best global sciences and to ensure that we are leading in taking down so many barriers and advancing opportunities. This is not just about science, but about trade and about the geopolitical barriers that we want to push, as well as the medical barriers. We must do that by ending animal experiment, not least because of the waste of those animals' lives, as I have pointed out. Overbreeding and failed pathways must end immediately.

Invest to save is the way forward, especially investing in the National Centre for the Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research, using that cost saving to invest even more into medical research. Only £10 million each year over the next decade is too little for that institution, so I ask that we look at the comprehensive spending review coming up to pivot into the new technologies for the future.

Public opinion has moved too. We must recognise that. The response to this petition and others, as the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) pointed out, has shown that public opinion of course wants to find the cures and pharmaceutical products to make a difference, but wants to do so in the most humane way. We know that the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 needs strengthening and that the pathways out of animal experimentation need to be accelerated.

The Animal Welfare Act is now an ageing piece of legislation. We need to ensure that it is brought into the modern age, so that we are not talking behind the curtain about animal experimentation in cages, but bringing into the light what is happening, ensuring that we have animal welfare at heart while reducing the unnecessary cull of and cruelty to animals. The animals clearly suffer in such experimentation.

I therefore echo the calls to gather a scientific council to accelerate the pace of work on the new sciences, to open the eyes of Government and others to showcase

[*Rachael Maskell*]

what can be done without animals being part of the experimental pathway. This is a great opportunity not only to advance science, but to end the cruel practice of animal experimentation.

5.8 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I had not intended to speak in this debate; I came to listen. In the light of some of the comments, however, I basically want to ask a question and to put down a caveat.

In the early 1980s, the splendid Bill Annett, who was the driving force behind the Fund for the Replacement of Animals in Medical Experiments, prevailed on me to become the founding chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for FRAME. It was supported by Professor Michael Balls, an eminent professor at Nottingham University, whose work in the validation of alternatives is probably second to none. Michael went on to become the director of the European Centre for the Validation of Alternative Methods.

The Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 was taken through the House by, from memory, my right hon. Friend David Mellor, who paid a considerable personal price for his work on that piece of legislation. The Act, when it hit the statute book, was regarded as a benchmark for animals legislation. Well, rather a few years have gone by since then, Mr Pritchard. We thought we were on a roll, but it saddens me to say that far too little progress to validate alternative methods has been made since.

We all want to see zero use of animals in medicine, but for the foreseeable future it is clear that that is not going to happen, for a variety of reasons, including, as my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) said, because animals are used in experimentation during the creation of medicines for animals. Clearly, that is necessary for the foreseeable future.

I stand to be corrected, but I believe it is also still the case that the licensing of new medical products around the world depends upon the use of animals. Whether that is necessary or not is immaterial, in this context, as it is a fact. If someone wants a licence for a new pharmaceutical entity for use in Japan, the United States or Europe, it is a requirement that it has been tested on animals. Personally, I happen to believe that the science has by far overtaken that necessity. The hon. Member for York Central (*Rachael Maskell*) referred to work with genomics. It is infinitely more possible now to do in vitro rather than in vivo testing of pharmaceutical products, and we should be moving faster in that direction.

My caveat to those who say, “Ban it now,” is that if we do that, those tests will still have to take place internationally and we would be in danger—I do not think this is a spurious argument—of simply transferring the problem from A to B, and patting ourselves on the back, while finding that the animals are still being used in testing in other countries, under far worse conditions than they are treated in the United Kingdom. Whether we like it or not, the veterinary profession takes a clear view of the work of the named vets in pharmaceutical companies, and I have no reason to suppose that they are anything other than humane and responsible.

My question for the Minister is, how can we use the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill, or other animal welfare legislation going through the House, to bring the process up to date, to advance progress towards the abolition of the use of animals in medical experiments and to do that in such a way that we can carry the international community with us? While a ban in the United Kingdom might make us feel good, it is not going to solve the problem. There has to be a global and, most certainly, a European solution, as well as a national one.

5.13 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the many petitioners who have ensured that we are debating this important topic here in Westminster Hall. Like all those who speak in today’s debate or listen to it, I worry about the state of animal welfare. I hope this debate will help to advance scientific research without the needless suffering of sentient beings.

I have been contacted by a large number of constituents in Bath who are animal lovers. So often, people see themselves through the eyes of their pets. They see a friend, capable of affection, happiness and pain. It is upsetting for all those who love animals to learn that, in laboratories around the country, man’s best friends are subject to torturous experiments under the guise of public good. As we have already heard, beagles are tested because they are forgiving, rabbits because they are docile and mice because they are cost effective.

It is not the first time that I have been asked to attend a debate on animal welfare. What was once a minority has become a visible and audible majority, as we have heard today, with over three quarters of the public wanting an end to animal testing. The “necessary evil” justification is no longer publicly acceptable. We should put an end to this unnecessary injustice. When we were members of the EU, animal sentience was recognised in law. As we work with the Government to transfer this essential insight into UK law, we have the chance to continue, or even better, those animal welfare standards by moving towards banning laboratory experiments as quickly as possible. As I have said, banning laboratory experiments on those creatures is ethically and publicly favourable and is supported by scientists.

The regulatory requirements that animals be used before human trials is now 75 years old. Reviewing this and removing the needless suffering of animals will finally bring scientific research into the 21st century. I recognise what the right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) has said—that we might ban it here, but we are still dependent on other countries where this is necessary—but setting an example is always a good way to move forward and take the global community with us.

This issue matters for other reasons as well. I have supported the roll-out of the covid vaccination, as everyone in this Chamber probably has, and we have supported it 100%. However, many people have refused the vaccine on grounds of animal testing. I understand their moral objections. For successful vaccine roll-outs now and for the future—whenever the next public health threat comes—it is important that we get as many people on board as possible, including animal lovers.

Covid-19 was a huge scientific challenge. Animal testing was deemed a necessary compromise. However, there is now much evidence to suggest the contrary. Animal-tested drugs have a 90% failure rate in human trials. The polio vaccine was delayed by decades due to inadequate testing on monkeys, as was treatment for HIV, whereas, human trials on diabetes and breast cancer have led to major scientific breakthroughs. The scientific outcomes from human trials far outweigh those of animal trials. Animal testing normalises cruelty. Its outcomes are negligible, and the tide of public opinion has turned against it.

Since our exit from the EU, animal welfare has been threatened by the current inadequacy of UK law, but I recognise that we are making our way through it, and I hope that we will make the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill as strong as possible. The Government must not water down animal rights; they must build them up—not merely through limiting biomedical testing but by banning live exports, regulating farming standards and accepting animal sentience. The moral and scientific case for tighter regulation of laboratory testing is glaringly obvious. It is time that the Government listened to increasing numbers of scientists and voters.

5.17 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve once again under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for leading such an important debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

Many colleagues have already noted that Great Britain is avowedly a nation of animal lovers. It pains me that we are here once again to ask the very basics from our Government: to offer the same level of protection to laboratory animals as will be offered to all other animals in the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill. As the Bill makes its way through Parliament, I welcome some of the changes it proposes: ensuring that we recognise animals as sentient beings and replacing the protections lost through the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union.

Perhaps we on the Opposition Benches should be flattered, as many of the promises made by the Government on animal welfare come directly from Labour's animal welfare manifesto. However, the Government's continued failures, and their delaying on animal rights, do not fill me with confidence that such measures will be implemented sufficiently. The matter raised by this petition is one such concern. In reply to the 110,000-signature-strong petition, the Minister's Department outlined:

"The Government believes animal use for research remains important and The Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 (ASPA) provides specific protection for these animals."

I would be grateful if the Minister explained the position, because if the Government are not willing to include measures to protect animals in laboratories in the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill, do they have any intention of reviewing the current rules on animal testing?

Sadly, the cruel treatment of animals within laboratories continues under the falsehood that ASPA provides adequate protection to animals. Under current legislation, the force-feeding of chemicals to dogs for up to 90 days without pain relief is considered "mild suffering", and it accounts for 67% of all procedures on dogs. It seems

completely hypocritical for Government policy to allow that high level of suffering to animals, while the Secretary of State claims:

"There is no place in this country for animal suffering".

It is clear that we must set out an achievable and long-term timeframe for ceasing to permit severe animal suffering, as defined in UK legislation, with a long-term objective to phase out animal testing entirely, particularly when so many other methods to achieve the same or better results already exist, as my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and others highlighted very ably. Groundbreaking new methodologies include artificial intelligence, advanced human cells, tissue cultures, organ-on-a-chip and stem cell technologies.

In some trials, the use of human cells has been integral to the findings, due to the genetic differences of animals complicating our understanding of human disease. As activists such as Louise Owen, the founder of For Life on Earth and the Scarlett Beagle campaign, Ricky Gervais, Peter Egan and accomplished scientists worldwide have rightly highlighted, penicillin's use for humans was delayed by a staggering 10 years because it had no effect on rabbits. The polio vaccine, as the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) highlighted, was delayed by even longer—for 40 years—because of erroneous, misleading experiments on monkeys.

The long, lamentable list continues; yet currently there simply needs to be no alternative in order for animal testing to be approved, rather than its needing to be the most effective or successful method of testing. Given the lack of sufficient Government funding for innovative trials without the use of animals, we are in a Catch-22 situation. Setting out a timeline for change would allow the transition to such innovative research and away from the cruelty that so often accompanies animal testing. That seems like a sensible approach, with humanity, kindness and modernity at its heart. I hope that the Minister has more than mere warm words, and has a clear plan for this much needed change.

5.23 pm

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for securing the debate. I also thank the 163 constituents of mine in Ochil and South Perthshire who signed the e-petition. The monitoring and regulation of animal testing has increased in recent years. Although that should be welcomed, it shines a light on the huge extent of the testing to which animals in the UK are subjected. Those animals, the vast majority of which are bred in labs, often suffer hellishly. The numbers are huge; the UK was responsible for 20% of animal testing across the EU, according to 2018 figures.

Let us talk about what we mean by suffering, as the severity of harm caused to the animal must be recorded by law. Shockingly, it can include

"a major departure from the animal's usual state of health",

normally including long-term disease processes. In 2020, roughly 57,000 animals were put through "severe experimental procedures"—that is torture, to you and me. It is utterly unacceptable that these animals are outwith protection from harm. It would be unthinkable to allow these callous practices under any other

[John Nicolson]

circumstances on any other animals. It is exceptionally difficult for us to know the true extent of these animals' suffering as the law blocks access to information about treatment during experiments. The vast majority of testing is done on mice, rats and fish, but as we have heard there are increases in testing on dogs, including puppies—a 3% rise since last year—and there has been a 29% rise in testing on horses in the last decade, to name just two species.

Millions of animals live their whole lives interned in laboratories, without love or affection. Tens of thousands endure treatment that is deemed severe. Were any of us here today to carry out these practices on an animal in our care, we would be arrested. Yet laboratory animals' pain is not less than other animals' pain; their lives are worth no less than any other animal's life. I believe that we should recognise that and inscribe their rights into animal welfare legislation.

5.26 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the pithy but powerful remarks from the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson). I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for his introduction to the debate and the 187 people from Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport who signed the petition.

I would like animal testing to be consigned to the history books; I think all of us in the Chamber do. The question is about the journey that we take between now and when that glorious day happens. What is that journey? What is the road map between now and then? What steps must we take to make what we achieve real and fair: something that does not simply export pain abroad, but makes us a force for good—a leader in the world when it comes to defining the new moral standards that there should be between humanity and animals in the future?

Every animal matters, and because of that we should not accept that some animals have to spend their entire lives as laboratory inmates, being tested on with cruel consequences. That is why we need to invest in non-animal technologies as an alternative to animal testing. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) clearly set out the powerful opportunities given by those alternatives. These testing technologies are becoming more sophisticated each and every year, so there is no excuse for them not to play a bigger role in the strategy each and every year.

I would like non-animal technologies to play a bigger role not just in terms of R&D funding and the objective, but in how the Government talk about this issue. The journey must be about not only science, process and reporting, but ambition and language. Frankly, for the last four and a bit years that I and my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) have been Members of Parliament, we have heard roughly the same language from the Government. I do not doubt that there are animal lovers in the Government, but I would like the language to evolve and our commitment to the issue to be strengthened. I would like the language that we choose to describe our ambition to end animal testing to be further improved each and every year.

I hope that when he gets to his feet, the Minister will be able to use more powerful language in this respect than we have had in the past. That direction of travel is important.

Margaret Ferrier: In my opinion, a key issue is a lack of accountability and oversight at the Home Office. Applications are not reviewed by experts in the field and there are concerns that the application-for-licence process is used as a tick-box exercise. Does the hon. Member agree that the Home Office must take animal testing seriously and treat applications with due regard?

Luke Pollard: The hon. Member's intervention raises an interesting question. In Labour circles, animal testing is often viewed as a Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs competency—indeed, I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), from the shadow environment team, is responding for us. But in Government circles, animal testing is a Home Office competency. If the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) had been Home Secretary, rather than the Members who were, would the Home Office have the same language and ambition around animal testing as in the right hon. Member's changes on animal welfare when he was Environment Secretary? That is a good example of how different personalities within Government have been able to move on debates about animal welfare quite considerably, but it does not mean that every part of Government has moved on with the same focus.

Animal welfare responsibilities exist across the Government. I made the point in the animal sentience debate that not only do we need strong animal sentience laws and a committee that covers the full breadth right across Government, but we need DEFRA and that committee to have the power to go into every Department to compel co-operation and collaboration with the committee. If there is a knock at the door and people say, "Who's that? Oh, it's DEFRA. Oh well," that is not a good enough answer when it comes to animal welfare. I also hope that we can move forward on animal testing.

I will briefly make a number of points that were raised with me ahead of the debate by people in Plymouth. One is about animal testing and Brexit. A large number of media articles suggest that our departure from the European Union has in some way moved our animal testing regime away from what we had when we were EU members. I will be grateful if the Minister can set out clearly the consequences of the decision to align the UK to the European Chemicals Agency's board of appeal structure. In theory, that is welcome, but the ECA states that certain ingredients must be tested on animals before being tested on humans. Although it rules out large parts of animal testing, there is concern that that ban deals with ingredients rather than finished products.

As a country, we have made large steps forward on banning animal testing for cosmetics, but there is concern—I will be grateful if the Minister can rule this out categorically—that that new decision means that certain cosmetics, including finished products and ingredients, will still be required to be dual tested in the European Union and the United Kingdom. It is one of those areas that generates concern, and I think hearing that from the Minister would satisfy many people who are worried about that.

The importance placed on replacement and reduction is good. The three R's of our animal testing framework—replacement, reduction and refinement of welfare provisions when testing animals—are welcome, but we need a fourth R: restriction. That framework needs to provide not regulation of where we are currently but a road map to where we should be. That is the evolution that I think Members call for when they look at enhancing the Animal Welfare Act 2006. We should all be proud of that flagship piece of Labour animal welfare legislation, but that was a very long time ago, and an update to the framework to include a road map out of animal testing would be very welcome.

There are some very good technologies available to us at the moment. There are too many to list, but complex cell models are a really good example. In the scientific community, there is real optimism about the potential for CCMs to help predict a drug's effectiveness in clinical trials, reducing the need for animal testing. I would like the Government to invest in research into such non-animal technologies. There is a real opportunity to do so. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central raised the opportunity to grant further funding to this area in the spending review. I encourage the Minister to work with his colleagues in DEFRA to look at whether non-animal testing technologies could be explicitly developed as a priority area within the shared competency between the Home Office and DEFRA in relation to spending review submissions to the Treasury.

Animal testing is bad not only for animals but for our economy, especially given the erroneous and negative results we have heard about during the debate. One area that has not been discussed so far is the impact on the Ministry of Defence. I am mindful of the importance of national security. One concern raised with me, as a representative of a military city, is how many animals the MOD uses in animal testing. I think all of us in the House support a strong national defence. We recognise that, in an ever-changing world where there are more and more pressures and threats against us, it is right that we have an understanding of the new biological, chemical and radiological agents that could be used against the United Kingdom and our allies, from both a military and a civilian point of view.

However, the large number of animals tested on, in particular by the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, is a concern. I recognise that that number has reduced, which is welcome—according to the latest answers to parliamentary questions, it was 1,500 in 2019 and 1,194 in 2020—but there is potential for a road map to decrease that further. We can apply further pressure to reduce testing on animals by the military establishment and move to more non-animal testing.

John Nicolson: Has the hon. Gentleman ever heard a good argument against using anaesthetics to reduce animals' pain?

Luke Pollard: If we are to experiment on animals—I concede that, in a small number of circumstances, the technologies are not yet there to replace those procedures—then ensuring that they do not suffer seems to be the minimum standard that we should be providing. I entirely get the hon. Gentleman's point.

According to the Government's own figures, the MOD conducted 58,867 experimental procedures on animals in the decade leading up to 2018. According to Cruelty

Free International, those included infecting macaque monkeys with tuberculosis, mice with Ebola and marmosets with pneumonic plague and haemorrhagic fever. We all recognise that there are real threats to us, especially from those diseases. However, the road map must take us out of that place, and one of my questions for the Minister about his responsibilities and drive in this area is whether that can go beyond just the Home Office. Can we make sure that it reaches into every part of Government, including our friends at DEFRA and the MOD?

A final point that was raised with me relates to animal welfare and animal testing in trade deals. As a nation outside the European Union, we are embarking on a new journey, making new trade deals with other countries. We have already seen real concerns about the trade deal signed with Australia; we are at risk of undercutting our farmers with food produced abroad to lower standards, particularly with respect to animal welfare and the level of certain pharmaceuticals.

There is also a concern about animal testing with respect to some of the products that we could be importing into the United Kingdom—both finished products and ingredients within products. I would be grateful if the Minister could set out where the Government's view on higher and higher restrictions on animal testing sits in relation to trade deals. Not only do I not want to see our farmers undercut by food produced to lower standards abroad, but I do not want to see us as a country become more reliant on ingredients and chemicals that have been tested on animals abroad.

We should be clear, as part of our mission as a nation to spread best practice, that we should use trade deals as a lever to improve animal welfare, rather than accepting the export of poor animal welfare to other parts of the world. There is a real opportunity to end animal testing. I would like us to set out a road map for how we will get to that point. I encourage the Minister to grasp that opportunity with both hands.

5.37 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for his comprehensive exposition of the important matter before us today. The petition calls on the UK Government to change the law so that laboratory animals are included in the Animal Welfare Act 2006, an issue that is very important to my constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran.

As my hon. Friend said, we have debated the principles behind today's debate, which is about the sentience of animals, on numerous occasions. He mentioned the debates on testing cosmetics on animals, on animal sentience and on a whole range of issues relating to the fundamental principle of animal sentience. The Minister and the Government have to understand that these issues are extremely important to our constituents right across the United Kingdom. We must be seen to be in tune with our constituents. We should not always be pulled along by public opinion, but we should try to put doing the right thing at the heart of everything that we do.

In previous debates on animal welfare, the Government have sought to reassure the House that they recognise animals as sentient beings. That is all very well, but by not including laboratory animals in the 2006 Act, they

[Patricia Gibson]

make those reassurances sound a little hollow to many of us here today and many of our constituents. Let me take the opportunity to pay tribute to high-profile figures, such as Peter Egan and Ricky Gervais, who use their celebrity status to promote animal welfare. I am sure that all animal lovers are grateful to them for the work that they do.

It really is remarkable that a society that considers itself to be made up of animal lovers tolerates the fact that every two minutes, a dog, a cat, a rabbit or some other creature suffers from brutal animal testing. It is remarkable that animals in laboratories can be poisoned by toxic chemicals, shot, irradiated, gassed, blown up, drowned, burned, starved, mutilated or subjected to some other such horror.

Home Office data shows that in 2020 alone, 2.88 million procedures involving living sentient animals were carried out in the UK. However, exactly what goes on behind the closed doors of animal testing sites in the UK is shrouded in a great deal of secrecy, as the law blocks access to information about their treatment during experiments. Section 24 of the Animal (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 makes it a criminal offence for that information to be disclosed. I see that the Minister is shaking his head as though he is either unaware of that or disagrees with it. I am sure that he will wish to respond in due course.

What we need, and what my constituents want—what I believe most people across the UK want—is a public scientific hearing on animal experiments. We need a rigorous, public scientific hearing on claims that animals can predict the responses of humans, judged by a panel of truly independent experts from relevant fields of science. Surely, anyone who sincerely believes in scientific research and believes that animal testing is necessary would have no objection to such a public hearing.

While the UK remains the top user in Europe of primates and dogs in experiments, we know that there is enough evidence that there are better, more accurate and more humane methods than resorting to animal testing. Recent developments in evolutionary and developmental biology and genetics have significantly increased our understanding of why animals have no predictive value for human responses to drugs or the pathophysiology of human diseases. Indeed, the biomedical science adviser to the Humane Society International UK, Dr Lindsay Marshall, said:

“The UK cannot expect to have world-leading science innovation whilst we rely on failing animal-based research methods that are rooted in the past...the data shows that animal models are really bad at telling us what will happen in a human body”.

The reality is that it is a human instinct to recoil at the thought and deed of inflicting unnecessary suffering on a sentient creature. The Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill will enshrine in law the recognition that animals experience joy and are capable of feeling suffering and pain. If that recognition is to mean anything, it must also apply to those animals that happen to be in laboratories. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) made an important point about the Ministry of Defence using animals for experimentation. I do not think that is widely known, and I think our constituents would find it alarming.

The UK is supposed to be an enlightened society, but that must be reflected in more than our words; it must be reflected in how we treat other living creatures. The European Union has moved with the times, away from cruel experiments on animals and towards cutting-edge replacements, as we saw when the European Parliament voted in favour of developing an action plan to phase animals out of EU science and regulation. I know some people in the Government—perhaps none of them are here today—whose hackles will rise at the prospect of our following the example of the EU. However, this is about preventing the unnecessary suffering of our fellow creatures and moving into the 21st century, where the science is taking us—if we let it. As Dr Marshall said, using animals for research can be “dangerously misleading”.

Notwithstanding the important contribution by the right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), we have to follow the science and start to move away from research that can be dangerously misleading. We must recognise animals as the sentient beings that they are, wherever they are. Let us follow the example of European nations and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and develop a road map for moving away from experimenting on animals and towards better methods that offer us real hope for cures, which is what we all want to see.

I hope the Minister will see the wisdom of ensuring that lab animals are included in the Animal Welfare Act, even at this late stage. I hope that he is listening and that he will also lend his weight to the establishment of a public scientific hearing on animal experiments. Science is about searching for the truth, so let us test the long-held so-called truth about animal experimentation using truly independent experts and see where the science takes us. No one should be afraid of that, whichever side of the argument they happen to be on. Let the facts speak for themselves. Let us have a public scientific hearing on animal experiments. Let us put an end to the unnecessary suffering of our fellow creatures.

5.45 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak for the official Opposition today. As it stands, this issue is a Home Office responsibility, but I am a shadow DEFRA Minister. I think that reflects the Labour party's commitment to animal welfare and where our hearts are. I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for leading this important and timely debate. He gave a rounded, Benthamite argument on behalf of the Petitions Committee and highlighted some of the extreme practices, such as the force-feeding of animals, in the world of animal testing.

We are considering e-petition 591775 relating to laboratory animals and the Animal Welfare Act. The petition received 110,000 signatures from across the UK, including 125 concerned citizens in my constituency of Leeds North West. I thank all those who signed the petition for bringing the matter to the House today. Animal welfare transcends party politics, as we have seen in today's debate. Respect and compassion for sentient beings are issues of morality and, as the debate has shown, of the utmost importance to the British people.

We have had an excellent debate, and I would like to highlight some contributions from hon. Members across the House. The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) demonstrated his knowledge of transgenic treatments, where the balance between practices and their benefits needs careful consideration. I thank him for that. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) reminded us of the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill, which is rapidly approaching the statute book, and the impact that it could have on testing, as well as the need for the Minister to respond to those points.

The right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), who has worked and campaigned on this issue in the House for many years, is right that progress has been too slow. He was also right to highlight the need to tackle the issue internationally and to talk about it at international and intergovernmental level. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) made a good point about setting an international example that I do not believe is in competition with the point made by the right hon. Member for North Thanet; they are complementary points.

My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) is right to remind us that many of the Government's pledges on animal welfare come from Labour's DEFRA team, and that ASPA regulations are considered way out of date for modern animal welfare standards. I hope that the Minister will address that. The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) was right to point out that animal testing has grown even though other methods have greatly progressed, and that all animals are equal and they feel no less pain in the lab than living at home with us.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) is right that DEFRA and the Home Office might have different ambitions for animal testing and that we need to update the three R's framework—that is well overdue. He has recently joined the shadow Defence team and speaks knowledgeably about the level of defence testing on animals. He is right to have those concerns, and I am sure he will pursue them in his role as shadow Armed Forces Minister. I congratulate him on his appointment.

I am pleased that the Government have a policy of limiting the number of animals used in science, and I am grateful that non-animal methods of research have developed and improved thanks to the work of brilliant scientific minds—not least those in the United Kingdom—and the tireless work of animal rights activists, many of whom have been mentioned in the debate. The development of alternative methods using human cells and tissues—so-called in vitro methods—and of artificial intelligence and advanced computer modelling techniques, or “in silico models”, means that we should have a greatly reduced reliance on animal testing.

[IAN PAISLEY *in the Chair*]

However, putting those advances and public opinion aside, we need to go further, as the debate has reflected. First, we need a comprehensive review of animal testing. That means reviewing the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, which the right hon. Member for North Thanet referred to at length, and a commitment to ending the severe suffering that is permitted under UK

legislation. I hope that the Minister will respond to that point, as it was raised by a number of Members. We also require a stringent review of defined areas in regulatory testing with the aim of immediately identifying and eliminating avoidable testing. I would like to hear what progress has been made in that regard.

For transparency, we need an end to the opaque project licence applications for animal research programmes. For any research programme to be authorised, it must be supported by a project licence. A project licence is important in understanding the study. We need to understand the scientific rationale behind it and the details of the procedures that will be carried out, and, perhaps most importantly, know that the proposed procedures will have the minimum possible impact on the animal. I do not believe that is where we are currently.

Project licence applications seem like shadowy affairs with little oversight. Some charities suggest that fully anonymised versions of selected project licence applications could be shared with stakeholders with expertise in replacement methods, who could then suggest techniques that could replace animal testing, helping to ensure that the legal requirement to use non-animal methods wherever possible is being properly enforced. Will the Minister consider that and outline what other steps the Government will take to create a more transparent method for licensing applications?

Finally, as we have heard a number of times in the debate, the Government should commit to phasing out animal testing altogether. Labour is the party of animal welfare. We know that more needs to be done to protect animals, and ending harmful and unnecessary animal testing is imperative to that goal. Since we know that the Government will not commit to that at this time, will the Minister at the very least tell us what will be done to reduce the suffering of animals in research that is happening right now?

This debate is important and timely, and I am glad to have been afforded the opportunity to question the Government and amplify the Labour party's message that we must work to end harmful and unnecessary animal testing once and for all.

5.52 pm

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): It is a pleasure to appear before you, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for securing the debate, as well as all Members who have made contributions. The Government recognise that this is a challenging and important policy area, with a huge amount of public interest.

The use of animals in science lies at the intersection of two important public goods: the benefits to humans, animals and the environment from the use of animals in science, and the UK's proud history of support for the highest possible standards of animal welfare. The balance between those two public goods is reflected in the UK's robust regulation of the use of animals in science through a dedicated Act: the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, or ASPA. That Act specifies that animals can be used in science for specific limited purposes only when there are no alternatives, and it provides protection for those animals.

I will structure my comments around three key themes: the relevance and benefits of using animals in science; how animals used in science are protected in law through

[*Kit Malthouse*]

specific legislation and with oversight from dedicated regulators; and, specifically, the breeding or use of dogs in science, which has been mentioned by a number of Members.

The use of animals in science never occurs in isolation. Scientists use and integrate data from a wide range of different methods, including in test tubes, computer modelling, the use of animal or human tissues, and clinical trials in healthy volunteers or patients. Funding is seldom solely for one type of research, but rather for all relevant methods to answer particular research questions. It is therefore not a matter of choosing between different scientific methodologies, but of using the best method for the specific experiment, and ensuring that animals and humans are not used when other methods can give the information needed.

As part of the entire research system, animal testing and research play a vital role in understanding how biological systems work in health and disease. They support the development of new medicines and cutting-edge medical technologies for humans and animals, and the safety and sustainability of our environment. Animal research has helped us to make life-changing discoveries, from new vaccines and medicines to transplant procedures, anaesthetics and blood transfusions. The development of the covid-19 vaccine was possible because of the use of animals in research.

Although much research can be done in non-animal models, as a number of Members have outlined there are still purposes for which it is essential to use live animals, as the complexity of whole biological systems cannot always be replicated using validated non-animal methodologies. That is especially the case where the safety of humans and animals needs to be ensured.

Animal models are constantly improving to become more accurate and predictive, and scientists understand progressively more about which biological systems in which animals offer the most scientifically valid results. Improvements in understanding the genomes of animals and humans have been critical to ensuring that scientific research in animals is understood and applied appropriately. Data from animal experiments are fed into computer models that analyse their predictivity and enable scientists to use animal models in smarter and more predictable ways.

There have been reports in the media and claims in the debate that 90% of animal tests fail. That is incorrect. There is a high attrition rate in drug development, but there are many reasons why drugs that are assessed as potentially effective and safe in animals do not progress to market. It is an incorrect assumption to suppose that an experiment that failed was otherwise pointless. In many ways, that is the point of experimentation: to work out what works and what does not.

Information from animal studies has an important function throughout the drug development process. It allows for the identification of factors that can be monitored to assess adverse effects from potential new medicines in their first clinical trials and helps to establish the first dose that can safely be given in these human trials. That is a critical part of protecting the safety of the participants in those trials. Results of animal studies are used as the basis for extrapolation to indicate and manage possible risks to humans. Should animal testing

not occur, more potential medicines would not progress to market, resources would be spent on potential medicines that would have been excluded through animal testing, and the risk to humans in clinical trials would be considerably higher.

I turn to the legal framework. ASPA is a specific Act to enable the use of animals in science while ensuring that there are specific protections for those animals. An assumption in the debate seemed to be that there are no protections for animals used in experimentation, but that is not the case. While animals used in science are excluded from the Animal Welfare Act, that does not mean that they are not protected in line with the underlying principles of the Animal Welfare Act.

To be clear, should this House seek to include animals in science in the Animal Welfare Act, as a number of Members have requested, no animals could be used for scientific purposes at all. That would result in increased risk to human and animal health and to the environment and a significant negative impact on the role of the UK in innovation and scientific progress. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) pointed out, that could increase global harm, as much of that testing would be offshored. In certain jurisdictions that have restrictions, evidence of such offshoring is clear.

ASPA protects animals used in science by requiring the operation of a three-tier system of licences: licences are required for each establishment in which animals are used in science, each project that uses animals in science and each person who performs regulated procedures on animals. In addition, the regulators operationalising and enforcing ASPA operate a system to ensure the compliance of all those who hold licences under the Act.

Since January 2021, the Government have been implementing a reform programme, which has resulted in improvements to the way compliance is assessed by the Animals in Science Regulation Unit, which is the regulator in Great Britain. That includes systematically reviewing reports required under ASPA and conducting systematic team-based audits, thematic audits across all establishments, inspections based on specific triggers and investigations of potential non-compliance. Collectively, the reforms seek to improve compliance and therefore the protection of animals used. We will continue to oversee the implementation of further improvements and monitor and report on the regulatory outcomes achieved.

Patricia Gibson: As the Minister will be aware, and as I said in my speech, section 24 of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act makes it a criminal offence for the information about how the animals are treated during experiments to be disclosed. It seems that the Home Office consulted on section 24 in 2014, but has not published the outcomes. Does he know why?

Kit Malthouse: I am not aware of why we have not published the outcome of the consultation. Section 24, however, only blocks public officials from releasing information given in confidence, and it came into place before the Freedom of Information Act 2000. It has never been used alone since the Freedom of Information Act came into effect, and information is released on a regular basis—a couple of times a week, in frequency

terms—under the terms of that 2000 Act, so it is not correct to say that it is section 24 that is restricting access. I understand, from my officials, that the consultation response will be issued later this year, as part of the work of the policy unit, which I will say more about shortly.

I turn to the use and regulation of dogs in science. The use of purpose-bred dogs for research in the United Kingdom is not prohibited under ASPA. However, the use of stray dogs is prohibited. Under ASPA, dogs, together with cats, horses and non-human primates, are specially protected species. That means that greater oversight is required of establishments holding those species, and of projects using them.

No dogs are authorised for use within the United Kingdom if the scientific objective can be achieved without using animals, or by using animals of less sentience. As with all projects approved under ASPA, all projects proposing to use dogs in research must justify why any animals need to be used, why dogs need to be used and why the specific number of dogs and exact procedures are required.

Most dogs used in science are required for the safety testing of potential new medicines, in line with international requirements designed to protect human health. Dogs are a species often used in research because of their genetic similarity to humans, which means that they suffer from similar diseases, such as diabetes, epilepsies, and cancers. The dog genome has been sequenced and mutations mapped, so dogs are incredibly important in basic research such as on muscular dystrophy, where there is a known mutation in dogs.

Research using dogs has been instrumental in the development of more than 95% of all new chemical medicines approved for use in the European Union in the last 20 years. That has included medications for use in treatments for cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and specific genetic disorders. Establishments that either breed dogs for use in science elsewhere or conduct regulated procedures on dogs are required to provide care and accommodation to those dogs in line with the published code of practice for that purpose. Adherence to that code of practice, and to all other standard conditions applied to any establishment licence, is assessed by the regulator as part of its compliance assurance programme.

Establishments breeding, supplying or using dogs in science are contributing to critical activities to protect human health and advance scientific progress. They are operating legally within a regulatory framework that requires licensure and assessment of their compliance.

John Nicolson: That is a long litany of justification, but perhaps the Minister would address just one specific point, which my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk raised: what is the scientific or ethical justification for pouring chemicals into the stomachs of puppies without using anaesthetics? Could he address just that point?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman obviously uses emotive language to describe a practice that, I understand, is called gavage, where the feeding of compounds into the stomachs of dogs is done in such a way as to ensure a consistent dose at a consistent time for a consistent assessment. As the hon. Gentleman will know, very

often the use of those chemicals is to assess two things: first, dosage and efficacy, and secondly, toxicity. I understand that that is the best method, scientifically.

John Nicolson: And if that was your dog?

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order.

Kit Malthouse: During the debate, a series of claims have been made about dogs being bled or force-fed, and I would be more than happy to correspond with Members on the scientific basis for those activities. While I understand that this is a very emotive and difficult issue—these are not pleasant practices that anybody would necessarily enjoy—there are sound, scientific reasons for their being employed. I would be more than happy to correspond with Members to explain how and why.

Mr Dhesi: I thank the Minister for giving way; he is being generous with his time. As hon. Members have pointed out, the language may be emotive but it is the truth. I fear that the Minister has failed to answer the question why anaesthetics cannot be given to those animals suffering.

Kit Malthouse: There are lots of circumstances in which anaesthetics are administered. Obviously, everybody is under an obligation to minimise whatever suffering may be incurred as part of an experiment. For example, reference was made to beagles being bled for scientific purposes. As I understand it, that happens from time to time but under terminal anaesthetic, and is not to be confused with the taking of small blood samples, akin to a human being giving a blood test.

The UK's aim is to become the world leader for the development, access and update of new and innovative treatments and technologies. We also need to protect the health of humans, animals and the environment. To achieve these important outcomes, we will continue to need to use animals, including dogs, in science, until such time as alternatives are achieved for all purposes.

The Government remain committed to robust regulation of the use of animals in science. That continues to be achieved by a specific, targeted exemption from the Animal Welfare Act and the operationalisation and enforcement of the Animal (Scientific Procedures) Act, which exists specifically to regulate and protect animals in science.

We are committed to supporting and funding activities to replace, reduce and refine the use of animals in science. We accept that continuous improvement is always necessary, and therefore we are sponsoring a change programme to optimise the performance of the regulator for the use of animals in science in Great Britain. Additionally, we have established an integrated policy co-ordination function, currently in the Home Office, across the whole of Government to bring greater strategic oversight to the policy area of the use of animals in science. That will give the Government more effective management and assertive control over that area.

To conclude, Members have raised a number of issues, some which are historical, some of which, I am afraid, they are mistaken about and some of which require clarification. I am more than happy to correspond with all the hon. Members here today and answer many of those questions.

[Kit Malthouse]

However, I finish with three points. First, it is currently the case that no human medical trials are possible anywhere in the developed world without safety testing in animals first. Notwithstanding the claims made by a number of Members today about comments made by particular scientists, that reflects the global scientific consensus at the moment, as I understand it.

Nevertheless, it is necessary for us to work on our three R's strategy, to move towards less animal testing. Since 2015, we have had a three R's strategy in place, devised by organisations such as the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory and medical research organisations. That is doing great work across the industry and ensuring that we get this right.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister give way?

Kit Malthouse: No, I am just drawing to a close.

Finally, I urge hon. Members to recognise that it is possible both to be an animal lover and to accept the need for experimentation on animals, in the greater cause of human and animal health.

6.7 pm

Martyn Day: It has been a very good debate. We have heard a range of views, all of which were rooted in animal welfare. As I reflect on what was said, I cannot help but think that there is a lucrative industry around animal testing that is well entrenched in the current systems, and that the animals in laboratories do not become any less sentient than the animals that are not in laboratories. We need to do something about that.

I hope the Minister will take on board and take back to Government the need for a public scientific hearing, because we need to go forward with a facts-based approach. That is something that everybody could perhaps unite around, and it would help us move this debate forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 591775, relating to laboratory animals and the Animal Welfare Act.

6.8 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 7 February 2022

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Local Government Finance Settlement for England: 2022-23

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations (Michael Gove): Today, I am laying before the House “The Local Government Finance Report (England) 2022 to 2023” and “The Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Principles) (England) Report 2022/23”, which together form the local government finance settlement for local authorities across England for 2022-23.

Having considered representations made by stakeholders across the country on the provisional settlement announced on 16 December, I am pleased to put before the House a settlement that focuses on stability and certainty. Indeed, no council will see a reduction in core spending power in cash terms for 2022-23 compared to 2021-22. The consultation received 148 representations from organisations, individuals and businesses, which have been diligently considered before finalising the settlement.

The settlement I have announced today:

- Makes available an additional £3.7 billion for councils, an increase in funding for councils of over 4.5% in real terms for 2022-23. It will ensure councils have the resources they need to continue delivering key services for their communities. Overall, this means up to £54.1 billion of funding will be available for core services;

- Provides a new, one-off grant to support all services delivered by councils worth £822 million;

- Makes available over £1 billion of additional funding specifically for social care; and

- Protects hard-working taxpayers from unfair hikes in rates, with a 2% core threshold and additional flexibilities for certain authorities, including 1% for councils responsible for adult social care services.

2022/23 Services grant

Over the spending review period, local government will have access to around £1.6 billion in additional grant per year for the next three years. This includes funding for supporting families and cyber resilience, which will be distributed outside of this settlement.

I intend to proceed with the creation of a one-off 2022-23 services grant worth £822 million, distributed using the existing settlement funding assessment. This funding will be excluded from any proposed baseline for transitional support in future years.

Adults and children's social care

I recognise that social care, for most councils, continues to be a key priority and therefore an area that incurs increased and sustained cost pressures. This Government remain committed to supporting local government in providing a good quality of care to the most vulnerable.

This is why I intend to make available an additional £1 billion for social care in 2022-23. This includes putting £636 million more into the social care grant, which includes funding for equalisation against the 1% adult social care precept. The Government are committed

to allocating funding in line with our assessment of where relative need is, and that is exactly what equalisation does. We are also providing a £63 million inflationary uplift to the improved Better Care Fund, which supports integrated working with the NHS.

This, alongside deferred adult social care precept flexibilities of up to 3% from last year's settlement, forms a package of additional resource, specifically for social care, potentially worth over £1 billion.

On top of this funding, £162 million in adult social care reform funding will be allocated in 2022-23 to support local authorities as they prepare their markets for adult social care reform and to help move towards paying a fairer cost of care.

Council tax

This Government recognise the importance of high-quality local services and believe in empowering local decision makers to shape thriving communities. This includes ensuring they have the flexibility to generate their own income through council tax, while protecting residents from excessive increases.

This settlement means: a core council tax referendum principle of up to 2%; an adult social care precept of 1% for all authorities responsible for ASC; a principle of up to 2% or £5 for shire district councils, whichever is higher; a referendum principle of £10 for police and crime commissioners; and a £5 referendum principle for the eight lowest-charging fire and rescue authorities. This settlement proposes no other council tax referendum principles for mayoral combined authorities or town and parish councils.

The Mayor of London has requested flexibility to levy an additional £20 on band D to the Greater London Authority precept to provide extra funding for Transport for London. The Government have expressed ongoing concern about the management of TfL by this Mayor, and it is disappointing that London taxpayers are having to foot the bill for the GLA's poor governance and decision making. While the Government will not oppose this request, any decision to increase the precept is solely one for the Mayor, who should take into account the pressures that Londoners are currently facing on living costs and his decision to raise council tax by 9.5% last year.

The Government's manifesto commits to continuing to protect local taxpayers from excessive council tax increases, and it is for the House of Commons to set an annual threshold at which a council tax referendum is triggered. This is an additional local democratic check and balance to avoid a repeat of what was seen under the last Labour Government when council tax more than doubled.

This package of referendum principles strikes a fair balance. The council tax referendum provisions are not a cap, and nor do they force councils to set taxes at the threshold level.

Councillors, mayors, police and crime commissioners, and local councils will rightly want to consider the financial needs of local residents at this challenging point in time, alongside the public's support for action on keeping our streets safe and providing key services.

Last week, the Government also confirmed a £150 non-repayable council tax rebate to households in England in bands A to D to help with rising costs. The rebate to

bills will be made directly by local authorities to households from April. Local authorities will also have a share of the £144 million discretionary funding that can be used to target additional support at those most in need. Local authorities are best placed to do this, which is why the Government have given this flexibility.

Stability of funding

This is a settlement that is designed to provide stability to the sector by rolling over much of last year's settlement. This includes:

Increasing the revenue support grant in line with inflation, which means an increase of £70 million;

Rolling over the current approach to the new homes bonus, worth £556 million;

Rolling over the current approach to the rural services grant, worth £85 million;

Maintaining the lower tier services grant, at £111 million, with an updated funding floor; and

Continuing with the 100% retention authorities in the five devolution deal areas and 67% for Greater London overall.

Looking ahead, the Government are committed to ensuring that funding allocations for councils are based on an up-to-date assessment of their needs and resources. My officials and I will work closely with local partners and take stock of the challenges and opportunities they face before consulting on any potential funding reform.

Finally, in recognition of the unique circumstances facing the Isle of Wight Council and its physical separation from the mainland, we are providing an additional £1 million for 2022-23.

Conclusion

This settlement is one that makes available an additional £3.7 billion to councils. In total, core spending power is expected to rise from £50.4 billion in 2021-22 to up to £54.1 billion in 2022-23, which will enable local government to continue providing key services to their local residents.

Councils are the frontline of public services within local communities and are the first port of call for so many people, from delivering critical social care services at every stage of people's lives, to making sure we have efficient and effective waste services in place. This Government recognise the vital role they play in our society. This is a settlement that recognises that role.

[HCWS597]

Private Parking Code of Practice

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Neil O'Brien): I am informing the House that the Government are today publishing the Private Parking Code of Practice. This is a key milestone which takes forward the implementation of the Parking (Code of Practice) Act 2019, which was introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) and supported by the Government.

The code sets out the requirements that parking operators must follow when enforcing parking restrictions in England, Scotland and Wales. These include a compulsory 10-minute grace period to prevent operators issuing charges for being just a few minutes late, higher

standards for signage and surface markings, and a crackdown on the use of aggressive and pseudo-legal language.

These changes will bring much-needed consistency to the private parking sector, benefiting millions of motorists. It will boost our high streets and town centres by making it easier for people to park near their shops without being unfairly fined.

Operators will need to make some changes to adhere to the new code. The code will come into force following an implementation period to give the industry time to adapt.

Parking operators will be expected to fully adhere to the code before 2024, by which time we will have introduced a new single appeals service for motorists to challenge unfair private parking charges. The industry should update their processes and procedures as quickly as possible from today so that motorists can benefit from the new code immediately.

The code has been produced through extensive consultation with key stakeholders, including consumer and industry representatives, which took place through a steering group appointed by the British Standards Institution. We have published a fuller account of this process in our Private Parking Code of Practice explanatory document, which accompanies the code. This document also explains the provisions of the new code in an accessible manner and assesses the impact of the changes on motorists and the parking industry.

There were a number of issues relating to the code which the Government consulted on separately, in parallel with the BSI process. This included proposals to bring private parking charges into closer alignment with local authority penalty charge notices.

Alongside the code, the Government have now also published their response to this further technical consultation on private parking charges, discount rates, debt collection fees and an appeals charter, which ran from July to August 2021.

After a careful consideration of respondents' views, the Government have decided to bring private parking charges into closer alignment with the system in local councils. This means that parking charges will be more proportionate to the level of harm caused.

We are also prohibiting parking operators and debt recovery agencies from levying additional enforcement fees over and above the cost of parking charges.

We will review these arrangements as part of a more general review of the code within two years of it coming into force.

The code is part of a wider enforcement framework, which includes a new certification scheme for parking operators, the establishment of a scrutiny and oversight board to monitor the new system and the creation of a single independent appeals service.

As per our commitment in the Government's response to our previous Code Enforcement Framework consultation in March 2021, I can now update the House that we have begun a product discovery to inform the design and delivery of the single appeals service. We will finalise the certification scheme for operators and establish the scrutiny and oversight board this spring. In autumn of

this year, the conformity assessment bodies will have received their accreditation and will begin to certify parking operators against the code's new requirements.

Spring 2022: certification scheme finalised, and scrutiny and oversight board appointed.

Autumn 2022: conformity assessment bodies (CABs) accredited by United Kingdom Accreditation Service.

From autumn 2022: all new car parks will conform to the new code.

End of 2023: Single appeals service appointed and transition period ends. Parking operators must now follow the requirements of the new code of practice.

We now welcome parliamentary scrutiny of the code of practice. I will return to update the House in future on the further implementation of the code, its wider framework and the single appeals service.

[HCWS595]

TREASURY

Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Exemption) (Amendment) Order 2022

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Today I have laid the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Exemption) (Amendment) Order 2022 (SI 2022/100) before Parliament. This will permit Norges Bank, the Norwegian Central Bank, to continue to benefit from access to the UK market without requiring authorisation under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (FSMA) in respect of specific activities under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Regulated Activities) Order 2001. These activities are: dealing in investments as principal, dealing in investments as agent, managing investments, arranging, safeguarding, and administering investments, and advising on investments.

Furthermore, so far as relevant to any such activity, this order also exempts Norges Bank from being required to obtain authorisation in respect of regulated activities of the kind specified in article 64 (agreeing to carry on specified kinds of activity) of the regulated activities order, pursuant to article 5(2) of the exemption order.

Prior to the UK's departure from the European Union, Norges Bank, as an EEA central bank, benefited from an exemption from the requirements to be authorised under the provisions of FSMA. Norges Bank operates Norges Bank Investment Management, which manages investments on behalf of the Government Pension Fund Global. Under the EEA central bank exemption, it was permitted to undertake regulated activities in the UK without authorisation. A temporary transition power allowed a directive to be issued through which relevant EEA firms may continue activities that they were previously undertaking. As enabled by the TTP, Norges Bank has benefited from this exemption, which will expire at the end of March 2022.

HM Treasury has, in consultation with the Bank of England/Prudential Regulation Authority (PRA) and the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), considered Norges Bank's suitability for an exemption as provided under section 38 FSMA, and has determined that Norges Bank is suitable for listing as an exempt person in

respect of specified activities outlined above. This will allow Norges Bank to maintain its current UK position by carrying out the same activities that they are currently undertaking, with regulatory certainty and without a need for authorisation.

The legislation laid today is intended to come into force on 31 March 2022.

[HCWS596]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Online Safety Bill: Priority Offences

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Chris Philp): I wish to inform the House that the Government will be making a change to the Online Safety Bill, to set out priority offences in primary legislation on the face of the Bill.

This change responds to the calls for greater clarity about the criminal offences in scope of the new regulatory framework, and will increase the pace of implementation of the regulatory regime.

Specifically, this change responds to calls from the Online Safety Bill Joint Committee and the Digital, Culture Media and Sport Committee's Sub-Committee on Online Harms and Disinformation, which recommended that the most relevant criminal offences should be included in primary legislation. The Petitions Committee further specified a number of offences that it believes should be listed, including hate crime.

We plan to include offences within the following categories on the face of the Bill:

- Encouraging or assisting suicide.
- Offences relating to sexual images, including revenge and extreme pornography.
- Incitement to and threats of violence.
- Hate crime.
- Public order offences, harassment and stalking.
- Drug-related offences.
- Weapons and firearms offences.
- Fraud and financial crime.
- Money laundering.
- Exploiting prostitutes for gain.
- Organised immigration offences.

Offences relating to terrorism and child sexual abuse and exploitation are already listed in the Bill. The Secretary of State will have the ability to designate additional offences as priority by statutory instrument, which will be subject to parliamentary scrutiny.

Priority offences represent the most serious and prevalent illegal content and activity online. Companies will need to take proactive steps to tackle such content. Companies will need to design and operate their services to be safe by design and prevent users encountering priority illegal content. This could include, for example, having effective systems in place to prevent banned users opening new accounts.

Beyond the priority offences, all services will need to ensure that they have effective systems and processes in place to take down quickly other illegal content once it has been reported or they become aware of its presence.

Listing the priority offences on the face of the Bill, instead of in secondary legislation, is an important step in strengthening this pioneering legislation designed to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online. This will mean that platforms do not need to wait for secondary legislation to start tackling the most serious illegal content.

We will respond fully to all three Committees' reports in due course alongside introduction of the Bill, and thank them for their recommendations.

[HCWS593]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Local Authority Public Health Grant 2022-23

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): Today I am publishing the public health grant allocations to local authorities in England for 2022-23.

Funding for local government's health responsibilities is an essential element of our commitment to invest in preventing ill health, promoting healthier lives and addressing health disparities and an important complement to our plans to invest strongly in both the NHS and social care.

The 2021 spending review maintains the public health grant in real terms for the spending review period. This will enable local authorities to continue to invest in prevention of ill health and essential frontline services like child health visits, drug treatment and sexual health services.

Through the public health grant and the pilot of 100% retained business rate funding which provides funding in lieu of the grant for local authorities in Greater Manchester, we are investing £3.417 billion in local authority public health in 2022-23, providing each local authority with a 2.81% cash terms increase.

The public health grant to local authorities is part of a wider package of investment in improving the public's health, including additional targeted investment over the spending review period of £300 million to tackle obesity; £170 million to improve the Start for Life offer available to families, including breastfeeding support and infant and parent mental health; and £560 million to support improvements in the quality and capacity of drug and alcohol treatment.

The 2022-23 public health grant will continue to be subject to conditions, including a ring-fence requiring local authorities to use the grant exclusively for public health activity.

Full details of the public health grant allocations to local authorities for 2022-23 can be found at: www.gov.uk. This information will be communicated to local authorities in a local authority circular.

[HCWS594]

TRANSPORT

Transport for London Funding Settlement: Interim Extension

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): Following my statement to the House on 5 January, I am updating the House on an interim extension of the current Transport for London (TfL) funding settlement that was due to expire on 4 February 2022 by two weeks to 18 February. This has been agreed by the Mayor of London.

Since the start of the pandemic, we have supported the transport network in London with over £4.5 billion funding through extraordinary funding settlements for Transport for London. We have recognised the reliance of London's transport network on fare revenue, and Government continue our commitment to mitigating loss of fare revenue because of the pandemic.

Government are committed to supporting London's transport network as we have since the start of the pandemic, and are in discussions with TfL on a fourth funding settlement. This short extension will enable us to finalise the terms of a robust settlement for this period, ensuring TfL and the Mayor take steps to move towards financial sustainability. In this extension, Government will continue to ensure the provisions of the existing agreement are delivered while providing continued certainty to Londoners as we move out of plan B restrictions.

Support to Transport for London has always been on the condition that Transport for London reaches financial sustainability as soon as possible and with a target date of April 2023 and Government continue to press the Mayor of London and Transport for London to take the decisions needed to put the organisation on a sustainable footing. I will update the House at my earliest opportunity on the details of the fourth funding settlement.

[HCWS592]

Ministerial Corrections

Monday 7 February 2022

TREASURY

Kickstart Scheme

The following is an extract from Treasury questions on 1 February 2022.

Mr Simon Clarke: We know that young people have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. I am delighted that, to date, more than 122,000 kickstart jobs have been started by young people across Great Britain, including in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Tom Randall). Youth unemployment fell **by 11.1%** in the three months to November 2021 and is lower than it was prior to the pandemic, and in December there were half a million more employees aged under 25 than in December 2020.

[Official Report, 1 February 2022, Vol. 708, c. 136.]

Letter of correction from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury:

An error has been identified in the answer I gave to my hon. Friends the Members for Gedling (Tom Randall) and for Devizes (Danny Kruger).

The correct information should have been:

Mr Simon Clarke: Youth unemployment fell **to 11.1%** in the three months to November 2021 and is lower than it was prior to the pandemic, and in December there were half a million more employees aged under 25 than in December 2020.

TRANSPORT

Cycling and Walking

The following is an extract from Transport questions on 3 February 2022.

Ruth Cadbury: 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.

[Official Report, 3 February 2022, Vol. 708, c. 444.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison):

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury).

The correct information should have been:

Trudy Harrison: I am delighted to confirm that we have now appointed Chris Boardman as the **interim commissioner** of Active Travel England, which I will be meeting after this session.

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