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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 21 February 2022

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. BORIS JOHNSON, MP, DECEMBER 2019)

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OFFICIAL REPORT

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

SEVENTY-FIRST YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 709

FIFTEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2021-2022

House of Commons

Monday 21 February 2022

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we come to today's business, I would like to make a number of short announcements. First, I would like to welcome the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who is observing the start of our proceedings from the Gallery. Madam Speaker, we are delighted that you are able to join us. You and your husband, Paul, are very welcome.

Secondly, I wish to say how sad I was to hear of the death of Christopher Stalford, who served with distinction not only as a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly, but as the Principal Deputy Speaker of that Assembly. I know all Members will wish to join me in sending our condolences to Christopher's family, friends and colleagues. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

Finally, I know the whole House would like to join me in congratulating Team GB on their performance at the winter Olympics. While the performances of both the women's and men's curling teams were outstanding, I know Members would like to join me in recognising the achievements of all in Team GB who participated.

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Ukraine: Territorial Integrity

1. **Jane Hunt** (Loughborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help protect the territorial integrity of Ukraine. [905584]

2. **Robert Largan** (High Peak) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help protect the territorial integrity of Ukraine. [905585]

8. **David Johnston** (Wantage) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help protect the territorial integrity of Ukraine. [905591]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): May I, too, welcome the Speaker of the House of Representatives—it was a delight to sit next to her at the G7 Speakers conference—and also Congressman Adam Smith, the Chair of the House Armed Services Committee? The United States is truly our closest friend and ally, and in times like these we need each other more than ever.

The United Kingdom is unwavering in our support for Ukraine, along with allies and partners. We are committed to defending regional security. We have long supported Ukraine's defence capability, as well as regularly exercising with its armed forces and via defence engagement channels. We must not allow Russia's destabilising behaviour to influence the territorial integrity of any other sovereign state. The UK remains steadfast in its support for Ukraine.

Jane Hunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for the call he held for MPs last week, during recess, following his trip to Moscow to meet his Russian counterpart. Could he expand on the value of that visit, and does this mean that defence engagement with Russia has been re-energised?

Mr Wallace: Diplomacy is, we feel, the only way out of this crisis. We are working through NATO and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, but Russia must uphold the international commitments it freely entered into and respect Ukraine's sovereignty. Dialogue plays a full part in the United Kingdom and allied approach to mitigate mutual risk and enable both sides to discuss the full range of security issues, including where we differ.

Robert Largan: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his answer a few moments ago, and for his leadership in ensuring that both deterrence and diplomacy are used to stand up for the sovereignty of the people of Ukraine. Given the reports of thousands of civilians being taken from their homes and taken to Russia as part of forced evacuations—a clear breach of article 49 of the Geneva convention—can I ask the Secretary of State what discussions he and colleagues across Government have had about any future role for courts, including the International Criminal Court? It is vital that perpetrators know that they will be held to account for their actions in future.

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The ICC obviously only has effect on the many members who are signed up to the treaties, and not every state is; the United Kingdom is, however. I think, fundamentally, this is about international law, and whether Russia respects international law and the previous commitments it has made to respect the sovereignty of Ukraine. If it fails to respect that international law, the international community will see it for what it is.

David Johnston: A few weeks ago, my right hon. Friend set out the defensive equipment that the UK is providing to the Ukrainian military. Since that time, there has been considerable additional build-up on its borders, so can I ask my right hon. Friend what plans he has to provide further equipment to the Ukrainian military?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend makes the important point that we have stood by our friends in Ukraine and, alongside the United States and other countries such as Canada and some of the Baltic states, provided lethal aid, as we call it. It is, however, important to recognise that, in this timeframe, there is only so much that can be deployed effectively. We will, however, keep everything under review, and it is important that we help people defend themselves.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): For a decade, Russia has targeted Ukraine with cyber-attacks to damage its economy, undermine its democracy and terrify its people. In recent weeks, those attacks have grown both in magnitude and frequency. Can the Secretary of State outline what the UK is doing to assist Ukraine in protecting its critical national infrastructure from the current onslaught of Russian cyber-aggression?

Mr Wallace: Over the last few years we have been actively engaged in helping Ukraine both internally and externally across its whole government. Indeed, when I was Security Minister we were engaged there and I visited on two occasions for exactly that purpose. Currently the National Cyber Security Centre is involved in giving advice and support alongside our international allies to make sure Ukraine's resilience is strengthened against the Russian playbook, as the hon. Gentleman rightly says.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State for Defence will know that I think he is a breath of fresh air in the job, but I also know that he shares my concern that we have been pushing down the numbers in our armed forces consistently over recent years. Can he give me an answer on this today: has the

situation in Ukraine changed the mind of the Government, and will they now build up our armed forces so we can offer credible help to the poor people in Ukraine?

Mr Wallace: Our armed forces right now are providing support in covid, in the channel, in eastern Europe, and in Ukraine and elsewhere. We are currently running at about 78,000 for the strength of our Army, and the hon. Gentleman will not have noticed, although he is obviously in agreement with me, that we increased the original commitment up an extra 500 from 72,500 to 73,000. I have always said the size of our armed forces and defence budget should be threat-led: if the threat changes we should always be prepared to change it. At present, I am minded to stay where we are, but we should also reflect that what we see in Ukraine is that our real strength is our alliances: 30 countries in NATO is the strongest way to achieve mass against a force such as Russia. That is why NATO remains strong and united.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is very difficult to know what is going on in President Putin's mind. Does the Defence Secretary spot a difference however between the perceptions of General Gerasimov and the other generals about the wisdom or otherwise of an invasion of Ukraine and those of the Kremlin? Secondly, given that President Putin has stated that Ukrainians and Russians are the same people, would it not be phenomenally hypocritical to launch an attack on people he considers to be the same people?

Mr Wallace: I regret to say there was absolutely not a slither of difference between the President and General Gerasimov and Minister Shoigu when I met them a few weeks ago; they are some of his closest advisers and supporters and it is clear that their vision of Russia matches that of their President. The hon. Gentleman is also right to point out that they claim the Ukrainians are their brothers—in fact they are their “kin”, rather than brothers—to launch attacks on people who were part of the Soviet Union for decades together has a retrograde effect. As we know now, Ukrainians who probably were not that bothered 10 years ago about which way they faced are absolutely determined that they are going to stand for Ukraine and fight for their freedom.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Defence Committee, Tobias Ellwood.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): May I join you, Mr Speaker, in welcoming our American friends to the House of Commons today?

Last week I saw at first hand how UK and American efforts are working hard to support our friends in Ukraine, so I commend both Governments on their efforts, but I remain concerned that NATO, the most formidable military alliance in the world, could have collectively done more in previous months to deter an invasion but chose to hide behind the fact that Ukraine is not a NATO member. Yes, we have shored up our NATO flanks, but that still leaves Ukraine exposed. Does the Secretary of State agree that Ukrainian security is European security, and by committing greater support to Ukraine we are trying to prevent a war rather than start one? And with the threat of invasion imminent, may I also call on the Secretary of State to provide more military support to Ukraine?

Mr Wallace: I fully agree with my right hon. Friend that Ukraine is part of Europe; Ukrainians consider themselves European, and it is absolutely the case that the ripples of anything that happens in Ukraine will be felt right across Europe whether it is in NATO or not. NATO is not preventing individual countries from strengthening Ukrainian security and capability through bilateral arrangements: the United Kingdom has done it, and so too has Sweden—it is not part of NATO but nevertheless stood up for its values and stood side by side.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow the Secretary of State, John Healey.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and may I extend a warm Labour welcome to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and her team this afternoon?

The Government have Labour's full support in assisting Ukraine in confronting Russian aggression and pursuing diplomacy even at this eleventh hour, and we also fully support moves to reinforce the security of NATO allies, as the Labour leader and I told the Secretary-General at NATO HQ earlier this month. However, although the doubling of UK troops in Estonia is welcome it looks like an overlap in rotation, not a reinforcement; for how long will this double deployment last, and beyond the steps already announced what more is the Secretary of State willing to do to reinforce allies on NATO's eastern flank?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to the right hon. Member. Mr Speaker, may I make a quick apology? There will be a statement on Ukraine after questions, but the statement has not yet arrived with my colleagues, or indeed with me, even though I did write it. There we are—bureaucracy in action. I do apologise to the House.

As the right hon. Member said, the overlap on relief in place can be there for as long as we like. We can keep it that way and we can reconfigure. Indeed, one purpose of forward-basing our armoured vehicles in Sennelager in Germany is to allow us that flexibility, with the vehicles forward and the people interchangeable. We will keep it under constant review. In addition, we have sent up to 350 personnel into Poland to exercise jointly and show bilateral strength, and 100 extra personnel from the Royal Engineers Squadron are already in Poland helping with the border fragility caused by the Belarusian migration. In addition, at the end of March we have Exercise Cold Response, which will involve 35,000-plus.

John Healey: Whether or not President Putin gives the go-ahead to military invasion, this unprecedented military intimidation is part of a long pattern of aggression against western nations, including attacks on British soil and against British institutions. Does Ukraine not expose the flaws in the Government's integrated review of last year with its focus on the Indo-Pacific and its plan to cut the British Army by another 10,000 soldiers? In the light of the threats, will the Secretary of State halt any further Army cuts and restore the highest defence priority to Europe, the north Atlantic and the Arctic?

Mr Wallace: Contrary to the right hon. Member's observation on the integrated review, I think that it has been proved correct. First, alliances—whether NATO,

bilateral or trilateral, and whether in the Pacific or Europe—are the most important way in which we can defend ourselves. We are reinvesting in NATO and are now its second biggest spender. Yes, troop numbers are scheduled to reduce, but spending on defence is going up to a record amount, and an extra £24 billion over the comprehensive spending review period is not money to be sniffed at. The integrated review is also a demonstration that, with further defence engagement and investment in sub-threshold capabilities such as cyber through the National Cyber Force among other areas, we can improve the resilience of countries that get vulnerable to Russian sub-threshold actions.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee, Dr Julian Lewis.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): What lessons have our Government drawn from the consequences for Ukraine of its decision in 1994 unilaterally to give up all the nuclear weapons that it had inherited from the Soviet Union in return for assurances on a piece of paper?

Mr Wallace: That shows that we must ensure that the Budapest memorandum—the signature between Russia and Ukraine in 1994—is stuck to. Russia should honour all the treaties that it has signed as well as its statements to ensure that mutual recognition of each other's security is upheld. If it does not do that, as my right hon. Friend rightly says, that opens up all sorts of questions about how much of Russia's word we can trust. If we cannot trust its word, I am afraid that it is a dangerous place to be in Europe.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson, Stuart Malcolm McDonald.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): On behalf of the Scottish National party, I welcome Speaker Pelosi and the American delegation to the Chamber. I also congratulate Team GB and yes, in particular, that fantastic curling team that so many of us have been enjoying in recent days.

As the Defence Secretary knows, we have supported the Government's actions in helping Ukraine to defend itself against its neighbouring aggressor. Indeed, the Government's actions in giving military support are an act against war. However, during my visit to the Ukrainian capital a couple of weeks ago, I heard concerns at Government and parliamentary level about them still missing some support that I understand they had discussed with his Department. Will he assure us that those discussions are ongoing or give us an update?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. On his comments about the winter Olympics, I have one of only two English curling rinks at Barton Grange in my constituency. I look forward to a Scots abroad event.

We are open to all sorts of suggestions. I speak regularly to my defence counterpart in Ukraine, and it is incredibly important that, should we get through this with a diplomatic solution, we continue to help support Ukraine's resilience both in capacity building and training and in nation building to ensure that it is a strong and secure state.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am grateful for that answer. I may be jumping the gun slightly—I suspect the Secretary of State might come to this in his statement after questions—but one thing we were asked about a lot there was the new grouping between Ukraine, Poland and the United Kingdom. The detail on that is not quite out there just yet. Will he update the House on exactly what the new grouping hopes to achieve? Can he give an assurance that it will complement the work of other allies, rather than overlapping it?

Mr Wallace: We are working through those details right now and, as soon as I can, I will update the hon. Gentleman and the House. It is incredibly important we recognise that Ukraine borders a number of major NATO countries that will feel the direct consequence of an invasion. It is also important that President Putin's view of many of those countries, which he himself has written down in previous essays, could continue should he be successful in Ukraine. It is therefore really important that the UK plays a strong role in reassurance not only of NATO countries, but of other friends such as Sweden and Finland.

Tackling Illegal Migration

3. **James Grundy** (Leigh) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the Home Office to tackle illegal migration. [905586]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heapey): Defence primacy in the English channel, under Operation Isotrope, will seek to prevent the arrival of small boats on their own terms in the UK, while ensuring the safety of life at sea. We are working closely with the Home Office and others to deliver that outcome.

James Grundy: Would my hon. Friend express his thanks to those brave armed forces personnel currently supporting UK Border Force in the important work it is doing in the channel?

James Heapey: I would, and it is an opportunity to remark on the fact that, whether at home supporting the work of Border Force in the channel and with defence personnel still involved in the response to the pandemic, or overseas as we are seeing in the news every day at the moment, our nation's armed forces are available at all times to do whatever is required to keep this country safe and secure.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): On the radio last week, the Minister said that to undertake Operation Isotrope the Ministry of Defence will have to acquire new boats. Will he give an assurance to the House that they will be procured in the UK and not follow the example of the Home Office, which has, to date, purchased such equipment from Holland?

James Heapey: The right hon. Gentleman refers to an interview in which I mentioned that they may be leased, rather than procured. As I went on to explain in that interview, there are a number of different platform types that will have different degrees of relevance and utility in the channel, all of which are under consideration to ensure that the right balance of platforms is available for what will be a very tricky task.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Would that not all be unnecessary if the French just controlled their own border? Our forces could then be redeployed, not protecting things in the channel. Are the French not at fault?

James Heapey: In the interests of bonhomie I will refrain from using such forthright language, but my hon. Friend certainly has a point.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): In the last two years, the number of migrants making dangerous channel crossings has tripled, with the Home Secretary failing to tackle people smugglers. Now the Navy has been called in. Will the Minister clearly outline the Navy's role and explain why the Ministry of Defence is being sidelined in discussions with our French counterparts?

James Heapey: The role of the Royal Navy, as we said in the urgent question a few weeks' ago, is principally in the control and co-ordination of a wide range of Government assets that we would argue are, at the moment, not brought to bear in the most coherent way towards the task at hand. The Royal Navy is looking at that and augmenting it with some Royal Navy platforms, both ships and surveillance and reconnaissance platforms. It is important to note, however, that most Royal Navy platforms do not have the outboard height required to be meaningfully part of any interdiction operations in the channel, so principally it is a command and control co-ordination exercise. If there are extra assets we can bring, we will.

Helicopter Manufacturing and Supply Chains

6. **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure the resilience of the helicopter supply chain in the UK. [905589]

17. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure the resilience of helicopter (a) manufacturing and (b) supply chains in the UK. [905601]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin): We recognise the need to manage risk and ensure resilience in our manufacturing and supply chains, including rotary wing. Through past and current investment in rotary wing capabilities, including Wildcat and Apache, and upgrades to Merlin and Chinook, the UK industrial base remains well placed to support existing and future helicopter platforms, and continues to be a market of great interest to our industrial partners.

Grahame Morris: I thank the Minister for that response and I declare an interest as chair of the Unite group of Labour MPs in Parliament. Further to my Defence question of 15 November, when I asked the Minister what steps his Department was taking to ensure the resilience of the helicopter supply chain in the UK, will he now assure the House that, whoever wins the contract, the new Puma-replacement helicopters will be both manufactured and assembled here in the United Kingdom?

Jeremy Quin: As we and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State have said, the competition for the new medium helicopter contract, to which I believe the hon. Gentleman refers, will be launched very shortly. Given the skills and capabilities in this country and the nature of that competition, I am confident that a very substantial amount of benefit will flow to the UK as a result of that procurement.

Christian Matheson: I also declare an interest and I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris). We do not want to get into another situation like the one with the fleet solid support ships. Will the Government ensure that the value to the UK of placing the contracts with UK suppliers and UK manufacturers is included and priced into the deal and the contract?

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. It is absolutely critical that we ensure that the social value associated with the contract is fully and fairly reflected in the tendering process. He has my assurance that we will do that and, as I said, it will not be long before he will be able to see more on that subject.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I entirely agree with others who have spoken about the importance of British manufacturers producing these things, but we have a very strong relationship with the United States of America and I welcome the fact that we have ordered 50 new Apache attack helicopters and are upgrading our Chinooks. Does the Minister acknowledge, however, that Boeing UK is now the fourth or fifth largest supplier to the MOD and that, as a British manufacturer, it is hoping to export goods—the new aeroplanes—to America soon?

Jeremy Quin: It is indeed, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right that Boeing is a strategic partner of ours. It also invests heavily, and I pay tribute to its work to enhance apprenticeships and its academic work, including in the far north of Scotland from our base at Lossie. It is an important strategic partner that brings value to the UK.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I am going to do something quite surprising and agree with the Secretary of State when he says, of the helicopter competition, that he does not want a “here today, gone tomorrow” supplier. What are the Minister’s plans to ensure that there is long-term investment in the UK helicopter industry, particularly in high-value engineering design and manufacturing jobs; apprenticeships; and enduring skills development in this vital industry?

Jeremy Quin: On the NMH, to which the hon. Gentleman refers, it is likely, given the timescale—we want to have the helicopters in service in 2025 or as close to that as possible—that we will be seeking to procure an existing platform. However, that absolutely does not gainsay the fact that we will want to see real social value created in terms of engineering skills and capabilities in this country. That will be part of the competition.

Dalgety Bay: Radioactive Material

7. Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): What recent discussions officials in his Department have had with representatives of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency on radioactive material detected at Dalgety Bay following the disposal of aircraft in that area after the second world war. [905590]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin): I am delighted that we are en route to the complete remediation of Dalgety Bay. Environmental sensitivities inevitably have a significant impact on the length of time that it is taking to complete the project. MOD and SEPA officials last met formally on 24 November. SEPA also has representatives on site continually to monitor the work that is being undertaken.

Neale Hanvey: I give the apologies of my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill), who has been turfed off a train on his way to the House.

I thank the Minister for that answer. The people of Dalgety Bay in my Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath constituency have had to put up with radioactive waste on the shore since the second world war. Thanks to the dogged determination of my predecessor, Roger Mullin, and my persistence, work on that began last May. However, the Ministry promised me and the community that it would keep us updated on progress, but we have had nothing from the MOD since May 2021. Will the Minister say why, and make sure that an update is forthcoming?

Jeremy Quin: I can give the hon. Gentleman an update now. As I think he is aware, we assumed that it would take two seasons to do the complete remediation. I very much hoped that it would therefore have been concluded by the autumn of this year. He is aware of the issues with birdlife that ensure that there is only a set period of time in which we can work. We applied for, and got, extended time to work last summer, and we will apply again for extended time this year. I hope that that will be sufficient, but I have to share with the hon. Gentleman that work may not be concluded until 2023. I hope that that will not be the case, but it is possible; we are keeping it under review. I will write further to the hon. Gentleman.

Armed Forces: Diversity and Inclusion

9. Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve diversity and inclusion in the armed forces. [905592]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): The Ministry of Defence puts diversity and inclusion at the heart of everything we do: we regard it as mission-critical. Our ambition is a 30% inflow of women by 2030. Army recruitment for ethnic minorities is currently at 11.7%. We know that we must build a diverse force to tackle the diverse threats that our nation faces.

Jane Stevenson: Improving recruitment in areas such as Wolverhampton would really help diversity in the armed forces. Wolverhampton also has a very high rate of unemployment. What more can the Department do

to ensure that every young person in Wolverhampton is aware of the fantastic opportunities open to them in the armed forces?

Leo Docherty: I should put it on record that Wolverhampton has a long and very proud tradition of people in the armed forces. What we can do is point out that recruiting is undergoing constant improvement. I invite my hon. Friend to visit her Army recruitment centre on Queen Street in Wolverhampton to celebrate the amazing careers on offer for young people.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Improving diversity and inclusion in the armed forces must also mean supporting disabled veterans. The veterans mobility fund closed last year, passing the financial burden to charities such as Help for Heroes to fund essential mobility equipment that is not available on the NHS. As forces charities face funding pressures, does the Minister feel that that decision is fair?

Leo Docherty: Of course we face constant pressures, but I should put it on record that we have doubled the amount that normally goes into supporting our magnificent armed forces charities. It is only right that we work in partnership with those magnificent people.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): On inclusion, the Defence Secretary will be aware that several parliamentarians have been lobbying hard, but privately, to get visa fees abated or preferably culled completely as a function of service. Please may I ask where we are with the consultation and with any announcements that may be forthcoming?

Leo Docherty: We acknowledge with gratitude my hon. Friend's active role in the debate. He should wait for news this week on that issue.

Women in the Armed Forces

10. **Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind):** What recent assessment he has made of the experience of women employed in the armed forces. [905593]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): Women are an integral part of our armed forces and have thriving careers. The Defence Committee's report on women in the armed forces made a number of important recommendations. Having tested them, the Ministry of Defence's own service women's network has adopted almost all the recommendations and in many cases has taken them further.

Margaret Ferrier: Women serving in the forces alongside their husband or partner have lost out on their military accommodation when they have reported incidents of domestic violence, because the Army has prioritised the needs of the male soldier. Women have also missed out on promotions or career opportunities as a result of reporting. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that victims of domestic violence are not further victimised by armed forces processes when they are brave enough to make a report against a serving soldier?

Mr Wallace: I am saddened to hear what the hon. Lady says. I would be delighted to meet her to discuss it; if she brings along the detail of the examples to which she refers, I will be very happy to sort this. No one should be disadvantaged for making a service complaint, or indeed a criminal complaint, whether they are male or female. We do not in any way tolerate domestic abuse or sexual abuse in the armed forces.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): May I pay tribute to the appointment and work of our defence attaché in Vietnam, Bea Walcott, who may be taking up another south-east Asian appointment before long? Does the Defence Secretary agree that there is huge potential for women in such roles, which combine diplomacy and procurement as well as armed forces expertise?

Mr Wallace: Some of our best ambassadors are women, and I hope that soon even more of our best defence attachés will be women. Defence engagement is an extremely important part of defence. The defence Command Paper committed to investing in that network, not only with better infrastructure, but with better training and support. She does a fantastic job. I would like to see many more; I also think that it is a great career opportunity.

Small Boat Channel Crossings

11. **Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab):** What role the Royal Navy has in tackling migrants crossing the channel in small boats. [905594]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heappey): I refer the hon. Lady to my response to Question 3.

Ellie Reeves: The Government have spent more than £200 million on deals with the French authorities and £780,000 on two Navy vessels, and have not intercepted a single boat. Now they are insisting on push-back tactics, which the Navy has rightly said it will not use. The human cost is harrowing. In November, 27 people, including children, died when their boat sank. Instead of wasting more taxpayers' money on unworkable initiatives, will the Minister finally back the solutions that will fix this crisis—opening safe routes of passage, meaningfully engaging with the French authorities, and implementing a proper plan to tackle people smuggling?

James Heappey: I am not sure that those elements are mutually exclusive. I absolutely agree with what the hon. Lady said at the end of her question—her suggestions for a solution—but I think that the measures she advocates must sit alongside a robust and resilient effort in the channel to ensure that even when they are in place, we are still able to protect our borders and stop people landing here on their own terms.

UK-Australia Security and Defence Co-operation

13. **Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con):** What steps his Department has taken to strengthen security and defence co-operation with Australia. [905596]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): AUKUS is a generational commitment to the security of the Indo-Pacific. Last month I agreed with my Australian counterpart additional steps to deepen our bilateral co-operation in the region, building on the

deployment of two UK offshore patrol vessels and facilitated by an enhanced British defence staff in Canberra.

Duncan Baker: The AUKUS deal highlights the benefits of co-operation between the Royal Navy and the Royal Australian Navy. The RAN's first boat, the HMAS AE1, was lost with all hands in 1914. In May this year, the sacrifice of those who gave their lives then—and nearly 6,000 others in the service—will be commemorated with a submariner memorial. More than half a million pounds has been raised to fund it, under the guidance of one of my constituents who is the project director. Will the Secretary of State join me in thanking our submariners for all that they do in the protection of our country, and will he attend the dedication if he can?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend has highlighted a very important part of our armed forces. I pay tribute to the submariners who keep us safe 24 hours a day around these shores. There have been 50 years of the continuous at-sea deterrent, and before that they played a strong role in both defeating the Nazis and, indeed, ensuring that we were protected. Few of us are privileged to know what they so often do under those seas. I want to join my hon. Friend in remembering those early submariners who, in 1914 and subsequently, made the ultimate sacrifice, not only in the service of their country but in pushing the boundaries to take us to where we are today.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): It is encouraging that the AUKUS agreement has bipartisan support in all three countries, but surely the Secretary of State will accept that it has to be about more than submarines and the military themselves. How are we going to co-operate to deal with the pressing problem of supply chain resilience and security, which is an increasingly weak point for our military effectiveness and sustainability?

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the fragility in the submarine supply chain, which concerns not just us but the United States, and indeed all those involved. These are highly complex boats, and keeping them maintained and ensuring that they are also a skill base is a real challenge for us all. That is why we have invested in a record number of apprentices, and have increased much of the necessary funding. As the right hon. Gentleman suggests, AUKUS must be not only about capacity-building and capability in themselves, but about how the United Kingdom and the United States industrial base can assist, support and develop those capabilities in Australia. It cannot be done on its own; it has to be done with all of us.

Defence Space Strategy

14. **Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con):** What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of the defence space strategy. [905597]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin): Over and above the £5 billion already committed to satellite communications, we are investing an additional £1.5 billion in space capabilities. The defence space strategy sets out our focus on intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, satellite communications, space domain

awareness and space commander control. This clear strategic direction has been welcomed by industry and allies alike.

Stephen Metcalfe: Space, in all its guises, presents us with an unparalleled opportunity to drive British science and technical innovation, create well-paid and rewarding jobs, boost our economy, and above all defend ourselves. Can my hon. Friend expand on what he has said, and tell the House what the MOD is doing to ensure that we deliver all those opportunities?

Jeremy Quin: My hon. Friend is correct in every respect. That additional £1.5 billion of investment implies very significant space R&D and the jobs, skills and expertise that go with it. It includes investment in things such as ISTARI, our ISR programme. It also includes innovation spending, as part of the £1.5 billion package, and programmes such as Minerva. Through that investment, we are not only ensuring that we meet the threats of the future, but helping to build capability, expertise, skills and jobs that will serve defence and the wider civil space programme.

Ukraine: Support for NATO Allies

15. **Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab):** What steps his Department is taking to support NATO allies in response to the build-up of Russian troops and assets on the border of Ukraine. [905599]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): The UK continues actively to support its allies on NATO's eastern front. The Prime Minister recently announced a further uplift of UK Defence support to eastern allies, including doubling the number of UK troops in Estonia, deploying more RAF aircraft to southern Europe, and deploying HMS Trent and a Type 45 Destroyer to the eastern Mediterranean.

Emma Hardy: I recognise the efforts being made by the French President to ensure that we have a peace summit, and I pray that he is successful. Unity with our allies matters now more than ever—a point that I hope some Conservative Members will take into account before making cheap populist swipes at our allies and neighbours. What are the UK Government doing to ensure that we have a united European and NATO strategy to demonstrate our commitment to Ukraine and our deep desire for a diplomatic solution?

Mr Wallace: All of us, including the French President, are signed up to the NATO alliance—all 30 of us. Indeed, it was NATO that responded to Russia's draft treaty that it offered in December; we responded in January. That is the common position that we are all bound to, and in that position we will not reward aggression or compromise on NATO's open-door policy. We will stick together as an alliance to defend the sovereign rights of countries and their right to choose, irrespective of what they do to that choice.

Armed Forces Apprenticeships

16. **Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con):** What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on increasing apprenticeships in the armed forces. [905600]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): We are proud that the armed forces are one of Britain's biggest providers of apprenticeships. Since 2014, we have enrolled more than 96,000 apprentices, and there are around 21,000 apprentices at any time. I was honoured recently to meet apprentices from across all three services who are doing qualifications from level 2 all the way to degree courses.

Robert Halfon: I want to thank the Secretary of State and his team for the dignity that they have shown in the recent affairs with Ukraine and Russia.

The Ministry of Defence is doing a huge amount of work with apprenticeships, which other Departments should follow. Harlow has a remarkable cadet programme in the Navy, RAF and Army. Will the Minister look at whether cadets who would like to stay on in the armed forces can then progress into a military apprenticeship, and will he come and visit the remarkable cadet scheme in my constituency?

Leo Docherty: Of course all young people should be aware of the amazing opportunities for apprenticeships and careers in the armed forces. I would be honoured to visit my right hon. Friend's constituency to see that scheme at first hand. The bottom line is that military service gives people skills for life.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Several years ago, a young man came to see me. He was about to leave school and he was as keen as mustard to join the armed forces. However, he had been diagnosed as being on the spectrum, and although I wrote to the then Defence Minister, he fell at the first hurdle and could not join and have the career that he wished for. Is the possibility of recruiting people who are on the spectrum being considered? It could be fantastically useful in terms of the cyber threat that we clearly face.

Leo Docherty: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We are actively considering recruiting people with neurodiversity, because of their capacity for working in the cyber sphere. I am pleased that he has raised this issue, and I can confirm that we are actively looking at it.

Army Reserve: Recruitment and Retention

18. **Adam Holloway** (Gravesham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve (a) recruitment and (b) retention in the officer corps of the Army Reserve. [905602]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): The new Army Reserve under the future soldier programme will improve recruitment and retention across the whole reserve force. We are doing that by improving the offer and giving young officers and reserve soldiers the opportunity to train and deploy with regulars, globally and nationally.

Adam Holloway: Does my hon. Friend accept that reserve officers join in order to have opportunities to deploy and train, commanding in formed units? Why does the future soldier narrative prioritise individual augmentation over deploying formed bodies for overseas roles short of all-out war?

Leo Docherty: I agree with my hon. Friend that reserve officers seek to deploy in formed units, and we are in agreement with that. That is why it is in black and white in the future soldier programme. We should not deny the opportunity for individuals, whether they are officers or enlisted people, to deploy on operations or training to gain valuable experience.

Eastern Europe: Support for NATO Allies

19. **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support NATO allies in eastern Europe. [905603]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): As I confirmed at the NATO Defence Ministers meeting last week, we will double the number of UK troops stationed in Estonia and deploy two Royal Navy ships to the eastern Mediterranean, and our RAF fast jet deployment in southern Europe will be increased to squadron strength. That comes on top of the deployment of 350 Royal Marines to Poland to support the Polish armed forces.

Antony Higginbotham: The current forward-deployed forces of the UK and NATO were put in place in 2017, at a time when Russia was acting belligerently. Circumstances have since moved on significantly, and Russia is not just belligerent but openly hostile. It is supporting Belarus with the weaponisation of migrants, as well as building up the most significant military force since the second world war. Will the Secretary of State therefore give more detail on the planning in the Ministry of Defence and NATO should further reinforcements be needed, and for any refugee crisis that might follow?

Mr Wallace: A few weeks ago, at a donor conference, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe requested that members of the NATO alliance put forward a range of forces—I listed some of them—and we are guided by where he wishes to deploy them to provide either resilience, reassurance or containment. NATO has a range of options that it can deploy at times of crisis, such as graduated response plans, and they will no doubt play in should Russia make the foolish mistake of invading Ukraine.

Topical Questions

T2. [905610] **Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): Despite current global events, the Ministry of Defence remains firmly on course to deliver the biggest modernisation of our armed forces. Today we published the "Defence Equipment Plan 2021-2031", which sets out our plans to deliver against the priorities we outlined in the integrated review last year. Backed by a more than £24 billion spending increase over this four-year spending period, the equipment plan sets out how military capability will evolve to meet emerging threats. Defence procurement will be at the cutting edge. This implies risk but, through the defence and security industrial strategy and our ambitious acquisition reform programme, we are determined to deliver for defence and for the taxpayer.

Sally-Ann Hart: Less than a couple of weeks ago, a boat ran aground close to Rye harbour at low tide and 21 migrants disembarked and disappeared on the run. It is reported that Border Force later turned up to the village to inform locals that 16 of those migrants, without identification, had been arrested. How can the MOD work with Border Force and the Home Office to take control, defend and protect our borders from migrants entering the UK—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady knows that topical questions have to be short and punchy. You cannot make full speeches on a topical question.

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend highlights one of the big challenges in controlling the channel. I reassure her that is exactly the situation we are trying to deal with. We must ensure that we intercept each vessel so that they cannot arrive in this country on their own terms. Under Operation Isotrope, we are planning to take an enhanced role in controlling cross-Government assets to tackle such migration flows.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): Mali's military rulers recently hired 1,000 Russian mercenaries, and four days ago France announced the withdrawal of all of its 2,400 troops based in Mali to combat the growing threat from Islamist terrorist groups. What changes will the Defence Secretary now make to the 300-9 UK troops stationed in Mali?

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point out the challenge with the French, as effectively the framework nation, withdrawing from Mali and the woeful state of the Malian Government's relationship with the Wagner Group, which has put us in a very difficult position.

The United Kingdom is obviously deployed in the UN multidimensional integrated stabilisation mission in Mali—MINUSMA—alongside the Germans and the Swedes, and we are now reviewing our next steps. The United Kingdom is, of course, committed to the UN effort as a good UN citizen, and we will do what we can to help west Africa. The right hon. Gentleman is, however, right to point out the corrosive and destabilising influence of the Wagner Group, which raises many questions. We will keep that under review and return to the House with more details.

T5. [905614] **Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): We now know that the cold war is back with a vengeance. We regularly spent between 4.5% and 5% of GDP on defence in the closing stages of the cold war. Has the time come to set a higher target than a bare 2%? Surely 3% should be a minimum.

Mr Wallace: I think I win the bet for predicting my right hon. Friend's question. It is absolutely clear, as I have always said, that our defence budget and our defence disposition should be based on the threat. If the threat changes, we should be perfectly open to considering changes, and we will. I will certainly pray him in aid if I make the case.

We should also recognise that the NATO alliance, collectively, well outspends Russia. All 30 nations together spend hundreds of billions of pounds on defence, way

above what Russia spends. That is the strength of the alliance, and it is why we need 30 members. That is why we can make a difference to Russia.

T3. [905611] **Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Following the cyber-attacks in Ukraine last week, how are the Government strengthening cyber security at home in response to growing threats and Russian aggression?

Mr Wallace: The national cyber-security strategy, which in effect started under the last Labour Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, has developed over the years, with significant funding—I believe it was £19 billion in the 2010 Government—and established the National Cyber Security Centre. Alongside GCHQ, that has made real step changes in improving our cyber-security. We are, of course completely aware that Russia plays across the global cyber-network and does not just focus on Ukraine; we have already experienced a number of cyber-attacks from Russia over the past few years. We stand ready to defend against it and will continue to do so.

T7. [905617] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): [R] As the proud mum of a Royal Navy officer, I have an interest in defence matters. In Cornwall, we are very proud of Spaceport Cornwall. Does my right hon. Friend see it having a role to play as part of the defence space strategy?

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin): As my hon. Friend's son will be well aware—

Mrs Murray Daughter.

Jeremy Quin: I do apologise. I am even more pleased that my hon. Friend's daughter graces the Royal Navy. She will know of the increasing importance of space to all the armed forces, and I can assure her that we are actively looking at supporting the wider Government ambition to have private companies launch from the UK this year.

T4. [905612] **Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Further to the question from the hon. Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) on the Government's response on the immigration cost for armed forces personnel, it is good to hear that the consultation response will be published, but will the Minister confirm that he is working to lower the proposed 12-year threshold so that the foreign and Commonwealth community can actually benefit?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman does not have long to wait—he will find out on Wednesday.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): My constituent's father is a former Afghan army officer who is in hiding. He was not able to get here under the ARAP—Afghan relocations and assistance policy—scheme. May I ask a defence Minister to discuss this further?

The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heappey): I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this particular case. However, he and colleagues from around the House will appreciate, although I know this is a disappointment to many, that ARAP was never a mechanism for rank and file members of the Afghan national army to come to the UK.

T8. [905618] **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The UK is now the only atomic nation with no official recognition of or compensation for nuclear test veterans and their families. Ahead of the 70th anniversary of the first British nuclear test later this year, will Ministers now do the right thing and give these veterans the recognition they deserve?

Mr Wallace: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says and I absolutely recognise that we are now the only country in this regard. The last internal review was in December, and I have asked officials to go back and look at that again.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend said that the amount we spend on defence depends on the threats that we face. May I remind him that we cannot just conjure up battalions? May I also, like two Members from the Opposition Benches, please ask him to reverse this disastrous decision to reduce our Army by 10,000?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend has often campaigned on the size of the Army. First and foremost, we have to recognise that modernisation is an important aspect of making sure that our armed forces are fit to fight. There is simply no point in having mass in a hollow armed forces. For too long, we had that out of step: either we had lots of people and inadequate equipment, or we had expensive equipment and not enough people. This defence Command Paper put that in balance, which means that it can deliver what it says on the tin and it does not let those people down.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): May I thank you, Mr Speaker, for the tribute paid to our dear friend and colleague Christopher Stalford, who we shall all miss terribly? On a lighter note, may I ask the Secretary of State whether he would join me at the Northern Ireland airshow in my constituency, where all the armed services put on a magnificent display each year, in trying to attract young people to a very rewarding career in the armed services?

Mr Wallace: I would be delighted to do so.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): With the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I have spent some time with the Commando littoral response force in the high Arctic, joining in their preparations for the forthcoming exercise “Cold Response”, which will involve 35,000 troops from 28 nations. Does my right hon. Friend agree that not only is that a show of NATO strength and unity, but the Royal Marine Commandos have shown themselves to be a valuable commodity, with skills in mountain, Arctic and amphibious warfare?

James Heapey: First, I am grateful to my hon. Friend and to all colleagues who are part of the AFPS, which is a fantastic thing.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right that our involvement in that exercise is a demonstration of both how the Royal Marines are transforming and our commitment to NATO. It also shows the integrated review coming to life, because the littoral response groups in the High North and in the western Indian ocean are two of the key new innovations of that paper.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Ministry of Defence leases 37,500 homes from Annington Homes, of which 7,230 are vacant, while 12,000 Afghan refugees have been in bridging hotels for more than six months. This just cannot be right, so what is the Minister going to do about it?

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): We have made 550 service family accommodation units available. All questions on this issue should be directed at local authorities, but we are doing everything we can to ensure that Afghan families are settled in the way they deserve.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): Last week, I had the pleasure of visiting Watford’s ex-servicemen’s club, where I met the fantastic staff during an evening of darts. While I was there, I met the founder of the Official Minds at War charity, Norman McGuigan, who works closely with local resident Liz Burns and many great volunteers throughout the country to provide mental health support for veterans. Good jobs help to deliver good mental health; what is being done to ensure that service personnel can take up jobs in our thriving defence industry?

Leo Docherty rose—

Jeremy Quin: We are fighting over the privilege of answering my hon. Friend’s question. As my the Minister for Defence People and Veterans, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) said earlier, there are 21,000 apprentices in the armed forces at any one time. Also, we are committed to lifelong learning: for five years after people leave the services, they can apply for and get support to retrain. It is a great opportunity for our service personnel, who have terrific skills.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State agree that the same esteem, respect and co-operation that the UK enjoys with Australia will be a feature of UK-Scottish relations on matters related to defence and security after independence? Crucially, though, as an independent state Scotland will, unlike today, have a seat at the table and a role in the decision-making process.

Mr Wallace: This year, the SNP is in favour of NATO membership, but who knows where it will be at the end of it? If SNP Members want to be part of NATO, they will have to spend 2% of GDP. Given that they will be almost bankrupt, I doubt they will be able to spend anything.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): Support for defence jobs is important, but so is support for veterans. Does the Minister agree that the armed forces charity SSAFA—the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association—which does a particularly excellent job on Anglesey, plays a vital role in the support of veterans?

Leo Docherty: I do agree that SSAFA does an absolutely magnificent job, as I have seen at first hand in Aldershot. I put on the record my thanks for everything that my hon. Friend does for veterans in her constituency.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): As we have already heard, the nuclear test veterans are a group of elderly individuals and, sadly, many of them have already passed away. It is in the Secretary of State's power to award medals at this point. Will he do so?

Mr Wallace: I am sorry to inform the hon. Lady that it is not in my power to award medals.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Last year, the Royal Air Force took part in Exercise Blue Flag in Israel. What lessons did the Royal Air Force learn from working with the Israeli air force?

Mr Wallace: I cannot say right now, but I can say that it is about readiness: we must be ready because we never know where the threat comes from.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State promise me that he will listen to the Reith lectures—especially the bits about artificial intelligence and robotic warfare—and then think about our defence plans?

Mr Wallace: Yes.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton), I very much welcome the fact that the MOD is taking the Arctic and the threat from Russia along its 20,000-mile

border in the Arctic very seriously indeed, as is NATO. It has long been promised that the MOD will produce a policy paper; when is it due to be printed, published or produced?

Mr Wallace: It will be produced in March, when hopefully I will visit Cold Response. When I came into office, I discovered that it was one of those classic Government strategies that had absolutely nothing in it other than a nice bit of narrative. I said I would not launch it until it contained some solid offers and deliverables, I paused it and we rewrote it, and it will be launched.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What discussions has the Secretary of State had with allies about the numbers of people who might seek refugee protection in the event of a Russian invasion of Ukraine? How is he going to go about ensuring that there is an appropriate and co-ordinated humanitarian response?

James Heapey: That is an important and perhaps very likely consequence of what may happen in Ukraine. The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that the Ministry of Defence would not necessarily lead on such a response, but obviously we stand by to support other Government Departments in their doing so.

Ukraine

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on the latest situation regarding Russia's actions towards Ukraine. As I have already said, I apologise that the Opposition had such late sight of the statement.

As of 09.00 hours today, there are now more than 110 battalion tactical groups massed around Ukraine's borders with Russia and Belarus. In addition, in the Black Sea Fleet, there are two amphibious groups, nine cruise missile-equipped Russian ships and a further four cruise missile-capable vessels in the Caspian sea.

In the last 48 hours, contrary to Kremlin assurances, we have seen a continued increase in troop numbers and a change in force disposition, moving from holding areas to potential launch locations. All the indicators point to increasing numbers and readiness of Russian forces, and, not surprisingly to many of us, the pledge to withdraw Russian troops from Belarus at the end of their joint military drills on 20 February was not carried out, and the exercise has now been extended until further notice.

Complementing this troop build-up has been the proliferation of false flag operations, propaganda stunts, and Russian news outlets carrying fictitious allegations. These are not the actions of a Russian Government fulfilling their repeated declarations that they have no intention of invading Ukraine. In fact, over the last few weeks, we have seen the Russian "playbook" being implemented in a way that gives us strong cause for concern that President Putin is still committed to an invasion. I believe that he is in danger of setting himself on a tragic course of events, leading to a humanitarian crisis, instability, and widespread suffering—not just of Ukrainians, but of the Russian people.

Like many of us, the Russians know the consequences of military interventions. The Soviet Union in Afghanistan and the first war in Chechnya are just two examples of where Russia saw too many young men returning home in zinc-lined coffins. The Government therefore urge President Putin—for the sake of his own people and even at this eleventh hour—to rule out the invasion of Ukraine and recommit to a diplomatic process for us to address the perceptions of the Kremlin.

Over recent weeks, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I have engaged numerous times with our international counterparts, including my own visit to Moscow to meet Defence Minister Shoigu and General Valery Gerasimov. We have made clear our determination to uphold the defensive principles of NATO and to defend the right of sovereign countries to make choices about their own security arrangements. As the Russian Government have signed up to, states have

"an equal right to security. We reaffirm the inherent right of each and every participating state to be free to choose or change its security arrangements, including treaties of alliance."

That statement was signed by the Russians in 1975 in the Helsinki Final Act, in 1994 in the Budapest summit declaration, in 1999 at the Istanbul summit, and, most lately, in 2010 at the Astana summit. We urge Russia to stick to its commitments that it has openly made and signed up to over the years. My counterpart, Defence Minister Shoigu, repeated to me in person that Russia

has no intention of invading Ukraine, but, while we take them at their word, we must judge them by their actions.

At our meeting I also took the opportunity to address the proposals in Russia's draft treaty, because, while this is not a return to normal UK-Russia relations, it is important that, as one of Europe's biggest military powers, the UK maintains strong lines of communications with Russia in order to avoid miscalculation and the risk of inadvertent escalations. I also continue to speak regularly to my Ukrainian counterpart, Defence Minister Reznikov, as we continue to support the armed forces of Ukraine.

Since 2015, the UK—alongside the likes of Sweden and Canada—has responded to Russia's previous illegal occupation of Crimea with defence capacity building, including training and reform. As I announced to the House last month, we took the decision to also provide lethal aid to Ukraine. That now means that, alongside the United States, Canada, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Netherlands, the United Kingdom has not just spoken, but acted.

I am pleased with the efforts being made by a range of European leaders, including President Macron, to find a way through. We must remain resolute in our commitment to NATO's formal response to the Russian draft treaties, which all NATO members signed up to. Intimidation and aggression, however, must not be rewarded.

We should be under no illusion: the Russian forces have now massed on Ukraine's borders 65% of all their land combat power. The formations present and the action of the Russian state to date not only threaten the integrity of a sovereign state, but undermine international law and the democratic values in which all of us in Europe so strongly believe.

The Foreign Office has now relocated the embassy further west in the country, and two weeks ago advised that all UK nationals should leave Ukraine via all means possible. The Ministry of Defence will continue to monitor Russian actions, support Ukrainian defensive efforts and contribute to NATO's response measures. We continue to hope that President Putin will relent and pull back from an invasion, but we must prepare ourselves for the consequences if he does not. I will update the House, as I have done over the past few weeks, both in the Chamber and to colleagues online.

3.35 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): The Defence Secretary has been busy in recent weeks, so I welcome his statement today and thank him for keeping the Opposition parties updated on Ukraine during these grave escalations of Russian military threats on the Ukrainian border.

This is the most serious security crisis Europe has faced since the cold war. The Ukrainian people, citizens of a proud, independent and democratic country, face an unprecedented threat from, as the Secretary of State has said, two thirds of Russia's entire forces now built up on its borders. There is unified UK political support for Ukraine's sovereignty and its territorial integrity in the face of that continuing Russian aggression.

The Government also have Labour's full support in helping Ukraine to defend itself and in pursuing diplomacy, even at this eleventh hour and even though President

Putin has proved more interested in disinformation than diplomacy. We also fully support moves to reinforce the security of NATO allies, as the Labour leader and I told the Secretary General at NATO headquarters earlier this month.

President Putin wants to divide and weaken the west, to turn back the clock and re-establish Russian control over neighbouring countries. The real threat to President Putin and his Russian elites is Ukraine as a successful democracy, choosing for itself its trading and security links with the west. An attack on Ukraine is an attack on democracy.

We welcome the message from Munich at the weekend that any invasion will be met with massive sanctions in a swift, unified western response. The European Union, of course, will lead on sanctions legislation for most European allies, especially to clamp down on finances or critical technologies for Russia. How is the UK co-ordinating with the European Commission and European Council? What meetings have UK Ministers had to discuss that co-ordination?

The other message from Munich at the weekend was that allies stand ready for further talks. The Defence Secretary has said this afternoon:

"I am pleased with the efforts being made by a range of European leaders, including President Macron".

What diplomatic initiatives is our UK Prime Minister taking, befitting Britain as a leading member of the NATO alliance and a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council? With the most serious tensions and developments in the Donbas, why did the UK Government remove UK staff from the OSCE monitoring mission there, when those from all other European countries have stayed to do a job that is more vital now than ever?

The Defence Secretary said, rightly, that we continue to "support Ukrainian defensive efforts", including with lethal aid. What more will he now do, with NATO, to help Ukraine defend itself? Can he speed up action via the Ukraine naval agreement? How feasible is a no-fly zone? What consideration will he give to support for Ukrainian resistance?

We cannot stand up to Russian aggression abroad while accepting Russian corruption at home. For too long, Britain has been the destination for the dirty money that keeps Putin in power. Where is the economic crime Bill, which was promised by the Government and then pulled? Where is the comprehensive reform of Companies House? Where is the law to register foreign agents? Where is the registration of overseas entities Bill? Where is the replacement for the outdated Computer Misuse Act 1990? Where are the new rules on political donations? Why does the Government's Elections Bill make these problems worse by enabling political donations from donors based overseas?

Whether or not President Putin invades Ukraine, Russia's long-running pattern of aggression demands a NATO response. Will the Secretary of State report from his meeting last week with NATO Defence Ministers on how the alliance's overall posture is set to change? Will he explain what action could be taken to better co-ordinate NATO with the joint expeditionary force—for instance, creating a regional readiness force?

Finally, does not Ukraine expose the flaws in the Government's integrated review of last year, with its first focus on the Indo-Pacific and its plan to cut the

British Army by another 10,000 soldiers? Will the Secretary of State now halt any further Army cuts, and restore the highest defence priority to Europe, the north Atlantic and the Arctic?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's support. He will know that throughout this process the Government have been grateful for efforts to be united across this House. That has been one of the strongest messages we can send to Russia, as is our being united across NATO and the EU, to make sure that this behaviour is seen as unacceptable.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about sanctions. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has been in conversation more than weekly with the EU on co-ordinating sanctions to make sure that the EU Commission, which is the EU's lead on sanctions, the United States and the United Kingdom are as closely as possible in lockstep. The EU has taken the position that it will prepare and deliver the sanctions, should an invasion happen, at that moment. The United States and the United Kingdom have laid out—we have put this before this House—the sanctions that they would put in place. That is a difference of approach. However, we know from our own experience that the EU can move very quickly at a Commission level when it wishes to do so. There is no lack of appetite in the EU to deal with President Putin through sanctions should he make the tragic error of invading Ukraine. No one should play into the differences of timing to suggest that; it is simply a different mechanism of approach. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is also working through a group called the Quint plus plus—that is, the US, the UK, Italy, France and Germany, plus NATO and the EU. They are all working together on these types of responses and are regularly having discussions.

I will write to the right hon. Gentleman on the OSCE, but I know that one individual has been in touch. He is a UK citizen. When the Foreign Office advice was issued, there were certain pieces of advice to citizens of our country. If someone find themselves in any organisation, we give our advice to them. Other members of the OSCE have left—not all of them—but I will get him the full detail on that as well.

As regards the bigger questions on issues such as aid, Ukrainian resistance and further support, the right hon. Gentleman will know that this has been best pursued on a bilateral basis between countries or groupings of countries such as through lethal aid. Much has been made of the fact that countries such as Germany and France have not provided lethal aid to Ukraine. I simply reflect, as I did at NATO last week, that the strength of an alliance of 30 is that we can all play to our strengths. It is important that we recognise that not every country, in its political system or political leadership, is going to have the same view, but in an alliance of 30 we can play to our strengths and deliver to Ukraine what it needs. We have seen, for example, an increase in aid to Ukraine from the likes of Germany, as well as medical supplies, while in other countries such as the United Kingdom and the Baltic states, lethal aid plays a part. That is really important. In order to keep going together at the same speed, we recognise that if we are going to tackle Russia, we have to be able to play to those strengths. The EU has a strong role to play in helping the resilience of neighbouring countries such as through migrant

[Mr Wallace]

flows in Belarus. If 1 million refugees appear in Hungary, Romania or Poland, I would urge the EU to step up and think about what it is going to do about millions of refugees on its soil rather than think about it afterwards. That is where the EU Commission can play a strong role in resilience-building.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the integrated review, but I think the situation is actually the opposite of what he said: if we read the full integrated review and the defence Command Paper, they show that we have to be ready. They show that Russia and adversaries like Russia do not go in with a big bang and just arrive in a big invasion; they soften up their targets using sub-threshold methods, cyber, corruption, organised crime and so on, and they turn up incrementally. Many of the forces we now see massed on Ukraine's border were in fact pre-positioned in April following an exercise and then went home to barracks. That allowed them to be ready and to deploy in days, while NATO's traditional model has been that it has taken us weeks and months to deploy.

That is why, in our defence Command Paper, we put a premium on speed and readiness. That premium may sometimes mean less mass, but that is why we have an alliance to pick up on that; we have an alliance of 30 countries, and we way outspend Russia collectively as a group of nations, and indeed on capabilities. It is also why I am now able to offer our NATO leaders true forces—forces that will actually turn up on the day, rather than what we had even in my day, when I was serving in West Germany or north Germany, which was fictional numbers, which meant that that when we pressed the button, instead of a division, we got a brigade. That is far more important in showing strength to the Russians and showing that we mean what we say and that we can deliver on it.

I was Security Minister when I introduced the Criminal Finances Act 2017. There was no greater champion of taking down dirty money in the City than me. I brought in the unexplained wealth orders. I brought in the mobile stores of wealth when people got round the provisions. I helped to set up the economic crime unit in the National Crime Agency. I ensured that we changed the law on tax evasion so that we got more people. I also pushed incredibly hard and successfully through the G7 for the transparent register of beneficial ownership.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we need to do more. I absolutely supported at the time, and still do, a register of foreign agents. He is also totally right on areas such as Companies House. The whole Government are now looking at these issues and are committed to doing something about them, and I expect an announcement soon on a range of them. He is right that the consequences of Russia's actions, going way back to Salisbury and before, are that we must stop the oligarchs resident in this country, with their dirty money, behaving as if this was a place of refuge, when they should not be welcome. If it comes to an invasion of Ukraine, Russia should know what it costs to be isolated.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend and the Government for the robust stance they have taken alongside our American and European allies in the face of Russia's threats against Ukraine? President Putin wants to weaken NATO

and the western alliance, but does my right hon. Friend agree that any further action by the Russians to invade Ukrainian territory can only strengthen the determination of the UK, NATO and the western alliance to defend the rights of sovereign states and to defend democracy?

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. When I was her Security Minister, it was her support that allowed us sometimes to overrule the Treasury and to get some of that legislation through to deal with criminal finances. She is absolutely right. In 2014, after the invasion of Crimea, President Putin got exactly the opposite of what he wanted: more forces in the east of Europe and more defence spending across NATO. If he continues down this line, I suspect he will continue to get more forces on his border and greater defence spending across NATO—the very opposite of what he intends. I hope he learns the lesson of 2014. At the moment, it is not looking good.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement and for the updates he has given Opposition parties over the previous weeks. I underline the fact that we on the SNP Benches are friends of Ukraine and supporters of international law, and we support absolutely Ukraine's right and ability to organise its security affairs as it sees fit. However, as can be seen from the Russian security council meeting that has been happening as we have sat in the Chamber this afternoon, we have reached a dangerous moment.

The Secretary of State mentioned the new sanctions package announced by the Government just before the recess, which stated that it would give the Government the ability to sanction entities and individuals of economic and strategic interest to Russia, but only if there is a further escalation. Well, that escalation has started, as could be seen by anyone following events in the Donbas region yesterday, on Saturday and on Friday. Is it not now time to start sanctioning individuals and entities of strategic interest, including those in this country? Furthermore, given the importance of disinformation and the entire architecture that the Russian Government have to spread disinformation about the conflict they are perpetrating against Ukraine, should that not start with some of the disinformation rackets here—the likes of RT, Sputnik and others?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and the leader of the Alba party may like to reflect on his celebrity status on some of those channels.

The Government already have some considerable powers, and Magnitsky sanctions have been used against a number of Russian individuals after Salisbury. In fact, some of the people I met in the Russian Ministry of Defence were sanctioned under such measures. We continue to deliver on that.

More widely, the whole of Government will produce a response for this House in due course. I understand the hon. Gentleman's point about using sanctions now rather than waiting for something to happen. The key point here is that we must be in a position to threaten to deliver sanctions against Russia if it does something. Were we to unilaterally deliver them now, but America and the European Union did not, there is a danger that would play into President Putin's attempted divide and rule narrative.

There are plenty of measures that we could take, and we are planning a serious set of sanctions. The question to President Putin is: “Do you actually care what is going to happen to your people, because it will be they who suffer the most as a result of the sanctions?” It will be interesting, as a responsible leader, whether he will listen to that.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Defence Committee.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I welcome this statement. The penny was dropping at the Munich security conference that this is about not just Ukraine, but a wider realignment of global power with the formation of a new Russia-China alliance that is fuelling Putin’s adventurism and, indeed, perhaps taking us towards another cold war. The money laundering issues aside, which absolutely must be addressed, I ask the Secretary of State to consider the sanctions. There is a concern that we are actually helping Putin with his intention of turning Russia away from the west and towards a new alliance with China in the long term.

Mr Wallace: If Russia wants to be dependent on China, I think it will recognise that that will be the wrong decision. China and Russia are in direct competition over the high north and the route through the Arctic, and Russia will surely not want to depend entirely on China, in the same way that many European states are regretting being entirely dependent on Russian gas. It is important, however, that we impose a range of sanctions that are directed not only at the Russian Government, but at some of Russia’s bankers and those who help the regime carry on as normal.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I fully support what the Defence Secretary said and the shadow Secretary of State’s response. However, as the architect of unexplained wealth orders, the Defence Secretary must share the widespread frustration that not a single one has been issued under the current Prime Minister—not a single Russian given a golden visa has been named. Why does the Defence Secretary think that we have been so slow at tackling dirty Russian money in London?

Mr Wallace: Unexplained wealth orders are not a matter for politicians; they are for economic crime investigators and the National Crime Agency. I can no more direct an unexplained wealth order than the right hon. Gentleman can. However, when I was Security Minister I was the victim of a Russian fraud that tried to suggest that I had a conversation with and tried to direct the Russian Prosecutor General.

I am disappointed that there have not been as many unexplained wealth orders as I had hoped, but the legislation was taken through and they represent a powerful model. They have been used against some pretty unsavoury people—I am delighted with that—but the right hon. Gentleman is right that not enough have been used. We are quite unique in having them—not many other countries do—and we should use them more, but we should understand why the NCA has not delivered as many as we would have hoped.

There are other tools to be considered. I welcome the long-term commitment on beneficial ownership, and I think we will soon see the Companies House legislation. I remember being horrified to discover that a sanctioned individual could start a company because, in those days,

I do not think that there was even an identity check. That has to stop. There has been some tightening up, but it will take legislation, and I hope the whole House will support it.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend’s calm and straightforward posture during the course of this, and I think he has done incredibly well. However, I say to him that, in all of our debates and even on TV, we behave as though Russia is threatening to invade Ukraine. Russia has already invaded Ukraine: it took Crimea, and right now it is furnishing the Donbas region with munitions to create even further trouble. When we look at it like this, what worries me slightly is that, with lots of foreign leaders going over to see Mr Putin, which is what he wants, we may just get a position where there is a little scintilla of a question of saying, “Well, maybe—maybe—we won’t let Ukraine into NATO, if it wanted to come in, and maybe we will make it clear that is not something it could get.” Can I get an absolute assurance from my right hon. Friend that the UK Government believe that if the democratically elected Government of Ukraine wish to do anything and ask to do it, they will be entertained no worse than any other country would be?

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point, and we should be true to our values. The Prime Minister was very clear at Munich that the point my right hon. Friend raises is absolutely the case. It is also the case that the NATO response to Russia—all 30 members—was very clear on that. We shall hold each other to that commitment, and I think it is absolutely right that now is the time to stand up and say, “These are our values and they are not up for compromise. We are not going to give a single inch and, fundamentally, we are not going to reward a bully.”

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State said a moment ago, about sanctions on Russia, “if it does something”. May I just press him on this point? We do not yet know for sure whether a full invasion will take place, but can he tell the House what the Government’s response would be if the action taken by Russia took the form of, say, a no-fly zone over Ukraine, blockading its ports, or repeated and significant cyber-attacks on Ukrainian institutions and Governments? In such circumstances, would the Government respond with the full sanctions that they have obviously been discussing?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to the right hon. Member. First, let me make it clear that, as he knows, lots of sanctions are already in place, so these are additional sanctions on top of the raft of sanctions that the Government brought in after the illegal invasion and annexation of Crimea and, indeed, of Donbas. I think he is absolutely right that many of these aggressive moves, such as a no-fly zone—in other words, threatening the integrity of that sovereign state—or a blockade to free trade would absolutely warrant a response ranging from sanctions to other actions. I think we would look at that at the time, but I absolutely agree that Russia should be under no illusion that threatening the integrity of a sovereign nation in the air or at sea is exactly the same as threatening it on land.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): Following the first invasion of 2014, and in order to get around sanctions, Russia has had extensive import substitution and investment in European companies in critical infrastructure and energy—a policy of tolerance, if not appeasement, by European Governments. Can I say to my right hon. Friend, who I think has been an exemplary Defence Secretary through this crisis, that sanctions alone will not protect Ukraine from a subsequent Russian invasion? We need either substantial improvements in its defence capabilities or a security guarantee, or both. President Putin believes that Ukrainians and Russians are one people—there is no lack of clarity there—and, ultimately, he can be deterred only by the threatened use of force.

Mr Wallace: The Government have taken the position, as has NATO, that this is about deterrence and diplomacy, and deterrence does involve upholding the shoring up of NATO members with resilience and containment measures to make sure that Russia is contained should it make the foolish mistake of an invasion of Ukraine. That is done by our forces, and it is why we have made even more available, including 1,000 members of the Army currently on stand-by in the UK to send elsewhere. My right hon. Friend is right that the heart of this is about defending Ukraine's right to choose—not what it does with that right, but, fundamentally, that if a democratic nation has chosen something, we should respect that. We are on the cusp of an invasion of a democratic country in Europe, and that should worry us all.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for supplying an advance copy of the statement. We should be clear: if Russia invades Ukraine, massive sanctions will rightly be placed on Russia, and if that happens, we can expect a salvo of cyber-attacks on the United Kingdom. I seek two reassurances from the Secretary of State: that we have the best possible defences against cyber-attacks; and that what is good for the goose is good for the gander, and that if necessary we could use cyber-warfare to give as good as we get back to Russia.

Mr Wallace: The Defence Command Paper published last year set out plans to establish, and grow to a significant size, the National Cyber Force, the UK's offensive cyber-capability that will complement our defensive capability. That is a joint GCHQ and Defence agency that will be based in north-west England. It has already been established and is starting to grow. I cannot comment on the operations that it will undertake, but I am a soldier and I was always taught that the best part of defence is offence.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): What will the Government do to try to impress on President Putin that even if he invades the rest of Ukraine without military comeback on behalf of Ukraine, it would be a fatal error for him to think that he could then invade an outlying NATO state—one of the Baltic states, for example—without an attack on one rightly being considered to be an attack on all NATO members?

Mr Wallace: President Putin's publicly stated view is that by potentially dealing with Ukraine, or preventing Ukraine from joining NATO, he is in fact saving us all from a future war; he wrongly asserts that if Ukraine

joined NATO, Ukraine would then attack Crimea and Donbas, and that would trigger a NATO response. My right hon. Friend is an expert on NATO and knows that is a fantasy scenario, but it could potentially be used as a justification. It is therefore important that we demonstrate that although Ukraine is not in NATO, we can do our best to protect its right to choose; and it is also important that we make it crystal clear to the President of Russia that if he tries this with NATO partners, no matter how big or small, article 5 is a reality.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am particularly fearful of the possibility of an outbreak of war in Europe. I was born not far from here during the worst blitz of the war with Nazi Germany, and every time I think about war, I remember my family—my father was away at the war—and the bombs raining down, killing our neighbours, so no one can give me lectures on this. We must firmly show these despots and dictators that we mean business in every sense. Will the Secretary of State join me in sending that message to Putin?

Mr Wallace: I have been very consistent on this. Like the hon. Gentleman, a number of colleagues on the Government Front Bench, and indeed some on the hon. Gentleman's side of the House, were born in a second world war environment, or have seen either people at the wrong end of a terrorist attack or death and destruction. No one comes here glowing with warmongering in their heart; they come here to do their very best to avoid it. However, freedom comes at a cost—freedom is not free, as the South Koreans know and put on their war memorials. We have to stand up to this. We did not stand up in 2014 as an international community; we did not stand up as an international community enough. We did send a very successful and strong message after the Salisbury poisoning—153 intelligence officers were expelled—but if Putin is successful in this, the ripples will not end; they will go through us all, and we will all regret it in the long run. Sometimes we must take a stand, and now is the time.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I understand that the Duma has passed a resolution saying that Donbas and the Crimea should be incorporated into Russia. That in some way would give Putin's plans some sort of legality, if he were to think of invading. If Putin was to replace the so-called little green men in Donbas with regular Russian soldiers, could we expect NATO and the west to respond with just as much severity, in terms of sanctions, as if he had invaded the remainder of Ukraine?

Mr Wallace: We have already put a raft of sanctions in place. Russian regulars have come and gone in Donbas, and they are already based in Crimea, which they take as their own, in significant numbers.

The Duma's latest resolution about Donbas is worrying. The resolution is about a sovereign state over which the Duma has no legal authority, and we should not recognise it. The Prime Minister has been clear that an incursion one inch over the border—whether that is one boot, one tank or one vehicle—will lead to the sanctions. We would not accept that as being anything other than an invasion; it would not be an intervention or an incursion. We will stick to that line.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): At this incredibly dangerous time, I notice that the Defence Secretary did not say much about the Minsk agreement. Does he think that is a way by which we can get back to talks? If the Russians pulled back, would he be prepared to countenance any reduction in the NATO presence on the border, to bring about longer-term, secure peace in the region?

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Gentleman raises a point about Minsk. I was clear in my press conference in Moscow and elsewhere that both Russia and Ukraine signed Minsk. As he will know, and as we have found with the Good Friday agreement, treaties are one thing, but the big challenge is in rolling up our sleeves and delivering the sequences in the right way. We all remember that from decommissioning in Northern Ireland, which was easy to write into the Good Friday agreement but hard to deliver, and it is the same for the Minsk agreement. However, we all recognise that the Minsk agreement is one of the ways out, and we should do our best to support its implementation.

On the right hon. Gentleman's point about pulling back NATO, we did not put 165,000 combat troops on the edge of a sovereign country and hold a gun to the head of a democratically elected Government; Russia did. We have nothing to de-escalate from; Russia does. I hope that he will condemn the Stop the War Coalition, which always seems to paint us as the aggressor. Perhaps he would like to ask the people of Ukraine who they think the aggressor is.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Has increased military action been detected in other Russian-controlled areas, such as Transnistria, as well as in Crimea and Kaliningrad? What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the possible threat—if not now, then in the future—against other former Soviet states that are outside of NATO, such as Moldova?

Mr Wallace: Russia's malign activity—we have packaged it up and called it that—has been a long-running challenge that we have seen in the likes of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In all of this, we should not forget that Bosnia and Herzegovina is in a fragile position, because it is in an impoverished state, the minorities are already starting to agitate, and Russia's influence on some of the separatists could send us all back to the early '90s. Russia's malign activity does no good. It challenges not only our European values, but the wealth of those states, seemingly for no reason other than to weaken people who think differently.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I fear that things have moved on yet further today. Mr Medvedev has said two disturbing things: that it would be perfectly possible to recognise the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk; and that there might be sanctions, but Russia could wear them, because, after the 2014 invasion of Crimea and the military action in Georgia, it wore whatever the west threw at it. Will the Secretary of State confirm that only a third of those areas are presently held by separatists, and that recognising, or trying to enforce, some independence in those areas would therefore mean a significant invasion of Ukrainian territory, including areas not held by separatists at all? Will he also confirm that Ukrainians are, if anything, more determined than ever to face towards the west, precisely because of what

President Putin has done over these years, and that if there is an invasion of any kind—any troops, as he said—the reaction will have to be a damn sight harder than it was in 2014?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman is right on his last point; the reaction absolutely has to be harder, and unified; and we need to stick to it. Often, the calculation in Russia is that we will all get bored, and that six months later, everything will go back to normal. Minister Shoigu said to my face that sanctions cannot harm the Russians; they will just go elsewhere, and are resilient. Unfortunately, that is the view of some of the leadership in the Russian Government. I doubt it is the view of the Russian people, who have to suffer the consequences.

We should also recognise the consequence for the wider world of this invasion. Yemen gets about 20% of its food from Ukrainian grain; for Libya, the figure is 44%. What would happen to those countries if there were rising food prices? A shortage of food is a horrible consequence that we must do everything to avoid. This is a global problem. Ukraine matters. Our strength of resolve matters, because, as the hon. Gentleman and I know, there are other, bigger countries looking at how much resolve we have to stand by our values.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I thank the Government and civil society organisations for all they are doing to expose false flag and disinformation efforts from the Kremlin. Putin has just finished his extraordinary meeting of Russia's national security council, at which, again, overwhelming support has been given for recognising the independence of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics. Before Putin announces his plans tonight, will my right hon. Friend please call that out for what it is: a dangerous precursor to the illegal annexation of those lands? Will he also confirm that, despite our focus on preventing further invasion, we do not tacitly accept that those territories that are currently illegally held are Russian?

Mr Wallace: We all accept that the 2014 invasion of Donbas and Crimea was an invasion of sovereign territory. Nothing changes that. All our NATO allies agree on that entirely, and have recognised not one inch of those lands. China, by the way, has still not recognised Donbas; that is an important message to President Putin. For all our issues with China, I do not think that it wants an economic schism at the heart of Europe at this moment. Hopefully, that is something President Putin will rely on. All these plans—the annexation of part of Ukraine, the false flags of people having to be evacuated, Ukrainian “attacks”—are false. They are all designed to be excuses, or to cause friction. The worrying thing is that we can all see it. One does not have to be an expert in Europe to spot what is going on. The worry for us is that President Putin thinks that it does not matter, or thinks that he can get away with it.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): First, I commend the Defence Secretary for his actions over the last few months. He mentioned the Russian playbook. Part of it is about portraying a false narrative around the sovereignty of Ukraine. Is he confident enough that we in the west have the ability to push back against the false narratives, particularly on social media, that seem to infect the debate?

Mr Wallace: We certainly have the capability, and we do everything we can, both internationally and unilaterally, to ensure that messages get across not only to our audiences but, importantly, to the Ukrainian and indeed Russian audience. We could start closer to home: we could ask the leader of Alba, on his next Russia Today programme, to do an in-depth analysis of some of those false claims and broadcast it. I am sure he is open to the highest bidder, and so will be very happy to do that. It is important to recognise that in this era, information is as powerful as any tank. We have to ensure that the ordinary people of Russia and Ukraine are not denied a free and fair press, and can get across the message of what is going on in their country in their name.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Under these circumstances, what obligations under the Budapest memorandum do Her Majesty's Government accept?

Mr Wallace: The Budapest memorandum, as my hon. Friend will know, was an agreement that Ukraine would disarm its nuclear weapons in exchange for Russia's recognition of its sovereignty. I am not an international lawyer, but I would guess that if Russia breached that—one could argue that it already has, with its invasion—the memorandum would become pretty much null and void. We are one of the guarantors of that memorandum, which is why we are doing so much now to hold Russia to account. As I said in questions and in the statement, let us not forget that in 2010 at the Astana summit, Russia, including Prime Minister or President Medvedev—whichever role he was filling—signed up, alongside the international community, to recognising that every participating state is free to choose or change its security arrangements, including treaties and alliances. That is what Russia signed up to then. Never mind the conspiracy theory that somebody somewhere said that NATO would never expand. We have never seen any proof of that; we have never seen any such document. What we have seen is at least four statements and treaties signed by Russia over many years that say it respects the sovereignty of countries to choose. We hold it to that.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I congratulate the Secretary of State on the leading role that he has played in rallying the opposition to Russia's aggression towards Ukraine. We know that many European nations find the situation difficult, because they have allowed themselves to be subject to energy blackmail through their zero carbon policy. However, Russian aggression against Ukraine threatens the strategic supply of food around the world, because Ukraine is the third biggest exporter of grain, at 100 million tonnes a year, so what assessment has he made of the areas of the world that are most likely to be affected if aggression should lead to that food not being available? Does he not agree that that underlines the strategic importance of Ukraine and the importance of giving it every bit of support to allow it to defend its independence, democracy and vital economic role?

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: this is not just about gas. We have focused on gas because, predominantly, that is what preoccupies us in our comfy part of Europe, but in many countries across the world, it is about food and other costs of living crises, some of which are far more pressing than whether

we can afford the potential increase of gas. It is very important that we do not forget that there will be implications right across the world—certainly the western world—if we do not deal with this situation and deter Russia. In Munich, the Prime Minister was absolutely clear with everyone, including the President of Ukraine, that we would stand by Ukraine and that we must be resolved together, both as Europe and as NATO. We must not salami-slice ourselves away on different thoughts. I know that when the Prime Minister speaks to his European counterparts he is very much focused on this sense of unanimous and strong alliance, challenging the assertions, because if we do not deter today, we will all pay for it tomorrow.

Sir Bill Wiggins (North Herefordshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the work that he and the Prime Minister have done. Having visited Georgia and seen for myself what Russian incursions look like, I ask the Secretary of State: if Ukraine is invaded, will Georgia be admitted to NATO?

Mr Wallace: Again, it is for Georgia and its relationship with NATO and for NATO collectively to recognise its decision on whether it accedes. Fundamentally—the Prime Minister has been clear about this, as my hon. Friend knows—that this is about maintaining the open-door policy of sovereign states. I said to the Russians very clearly that NATO does not go around choosing people. People choose NATO. They choose our values and that is how it is done. There is no secret plot to go around undermining or dividing Russia, and the question for President Putin should be: why is it that all those countries wanted to join NATO in the first place? It was not to collect a badge, but because they felt under threat by a nation that did not want to respect their sovereignty, their democracy and their freedom.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. The situation is clearly very grave, but he obviously has a pretty clear view of the situation on the ground. The wife of my constituent is stuck in Ukraine near the Russian border. She cannot complete a medical assessment or enrol her biometrics to complete a spousal visa, and because he is not in Ukraine, they cannot use the family migration route. What pressure can the Secretary of State bring to bear on the Home Office to ensure that if the situation escalates, as seems inevitable, our military are not left to evacuate citizens and families?

Mr Wallace: If the hon. and learned Member sends me the details, I will be very happy to take that up and look at it for her.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State and the Minister for the Armed Forces for the fantastic job that they are doing in very difficult circumstances. If Russia does invade, NATO countries, particularly the smaller ones and particularly the Baltic countries, will need our reassurance. Does the Secretary of State foresee further deployments of British troops to those countries? If so, would it not be hugely reassuring to him if he had 10,000 more troops in his back pocket?

Mr Wallace: We are hosting the 10 nations of the joint expeditionary force, which includes the Nordic states plus Iceland and Holland, tonight and tomorrow

at a summit. I have invited colleagues across the House, including Members on the Labour Front Bench and in the Scottish National party and the Liberal Democrats, because it is important that we recognise those countries' importance to us as our allies. They are the ones on that frontline. My hon. Friend is right that they will be the ones most worried; some of them are territories that President Putin and his like have often felt are not territories. As I have said before, we should look at President Putin's essay from July last year. That is one of the consequences, I fear, of President Putin being successful in Ukraine. Where will the ripples land next? We will need forces for that. We have been managing to double that up into a brigade. The enhanced forward presence is currently four multinational battlegroups; I suspect that it will grow. We will be open to more suggestions.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): We should be moving against Russian dirty money in the City of London, regardless of what happens in Ukraine. I do not doubt the determination to deal with it that the Secretary of State has expressed today, but the lack of activity suggests that others in the Government do not share that determination. Can he assure us that should there be an invasion, even tonight, we are ready to take action against that dirty money?

Mr Wallace: It will not have been missed by anyone in this House that we are all vulnerable not only to dirty money, but to illicit lobbying or influence by foreign agents—all of us in this House. We have to wake up to the threat of sub-threshold challenges, whether those are money, corruption or political interference—all of us. I am not going to throw stones in glass houses, but all Conservative Members and all Opposition Members know what that looks like. We have to have more transparency, as the beginning of that process, and we have to enact some of the laws that we already have. I would be very happy, on the hon. Gentleman's behalf, to engage with the National Crime Agency to see what more we can do.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. If we have shorter questions and the Secretary of State can therefore give shorter answers, we will be able to get everyone in; if not, I am afraid that some people will be disappointed. As we can see, people are coming in for the next item of business, but this statement is important and I would like to give everybody the chance to speak. Shorter, please.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that sovereignty must be respected and that that includes Ukraine. Does my right hon. Friend believe that that will encourage President Putin to hold back? Should President Putin still invade, what impact will that have on Sino-Russian relationships and how concerned should we be for Taiwan? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Wallace: The Minister for the Armed Forces says, "Answer that in five words."

It is a very important message from China to Russia, and President Putin should listen to it, but of course the

most important message is that we demonstrate our resolve to protect our values, because whatever we do or do not do in this part of the world, China is watching.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Secretary of State is being slightly more gracious about the work of European leaders in trying to find a diplomatic solution, but just a week or so ago he was saying that those efforts had "a whiff of Munich" about them. Does he want to apologise for that remark, which was not only crass, but undermined efforts to deliver Minsk II as the starting point for our best chance of avoiding war? Does he accept that if the Government are serious about playing a constructive role, they should start by getting their own house in order—first of all by repaying the almost £2 million that his party has received in Russian donations since the Prime Minister took office? Will he finally end London's role in hiding the proceeds of Kremlin-connected corruption?

Mr Wallace: I am sure that the hon. Lady understands what I meant when I said that if President Putin invaded Ukraine, there would be "a whiff of Munich". Of course, there were two parts to Munich: there was the appeasement, but there was also the fact that, all the way through, Hitler lied and had a plan to aggressively invade large parts of Europe. My point, as I set out in my article, was that if President Putin invaded, we would be chasing a straw man when all along he had a predetermined plan.

I suggest that, before making allegations of that sort, the hon. Lady should go back to the history books in order to understand what Munich was about. Then she will understand what I was saying. We know that, time and again, President Putin has ignored international law, ignored human rights, invaded countries, and murdered British people on these streets through orders to the GRU—and all that the hon. Lady can do is come here, stand up and tell us that we are in the wrong. Perhaps she should go to Moscow and tell it to them.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I know my right hon. Friend will agree that jaw-jaw is preferable to war-war, but does he accept that given Russian ambitions regarding Ukraine and events elsewhere, including in the South China sea, the time has finally come for the United Kingdom to recognise that we need to substantially increase our defence spending on a sustainable, long-term basis? Jaw-jaw is far more effective if a country has strong armed forces.

Mr Wallace: The Prime Minister supported and delivered the biggest increase in defence spending since the cold war. The purpose of that extra £24 billion was to modernise our armed forces, and also to ensure that we are able to enter new domains where we are threatened by both Russia and other adversaries. That is the right track.

We have been consistent, as has the Prime Minister, on the fundamental point that if the threat changes, we should always been open to review. We should also recognise that we achieve our strength in the west through our alliances: our alliances on our values, and our alliances on our defence spending. NATO is the best alliance in that regard. It is the keystone of European security. Our spending outstrips Russia's, and our forces do so as well. The one thing that we must make sure that we continue is resolve, because resolve is what this crisis is about. We are resolved, the Prime Minister is

[Mr Wallace]

resolved and the United Kingdom is resolved: we are going to stand up for our values again, and stand up to Putin's aggression.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): From a logistical perspective, may I ask what efforts are being made to ramp up the provision of equipment and parts which the Ukrainian military has specifically requested from the Ministry of Defence? How is that sourcing being co-ordinated with international partners to secure all the required resources and kit that are needed for the Ukrainians to defend themselves, and how are they being trained in the use of that kit?

Mr Wallace: I am in constant contact with my counterpart in Ukraine—we talk regularly—and the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have been incredibly supportive. We are currently at the stage where, as I said earlier, we have supplied the anti-tank weapons and other non-lethal equipment. Britain has been side by side with Ukraine since 2014-15, so there has been a significant amount of training and capacity-building, and we will continue to look into what other options are available. We have those discussions, and where we can, we meet Ukraine's demand; where we cannot, we try to help others to meet it.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the leadership that he has shown in recent months. The paradox is that the more Putin tries to draw countries towards Moscow, the more he repels them and the more he revitalises the very alliance that he says he is most afraid of: NATO.

May I ask my right hon. Friend specifically about sanctions? Will the UK, when it presents its package, ensure that its sanctions are synchronised with those of the United States, that they include action to prevent UK banks from handling foreign currency transfers from Russian state-owned banks, and that they also include what I know our colleagues in the United States Senate would like to include—specific sanctions against Nord Stream 2?

Mr Wallace: The President of the United States made it very clear that he will stop Nord Stream 2. I listened to that press conference, like everyone else. As for the raft of sanctions that the Government have brought forward, they are intelligently targeted, and build on existing sanctions following Crimea. However, we will of course continue to keep those measures under review.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Today Mr Putin is holding an unscheduled meeting with the Russian security council, which he says will decide on the recognition of the two breakaway republics. What would be the implication of such an eventuality for the Minsk protocols?

Mr Wallace: As I said to the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), we urge both parties to have regard to the Minsk agreement. Only a few weeks ago, the Russians were saying that that should be under the agreement, but I think that some of those measures go exactly against it. Perhaps that is a clue to the real intention.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): When I was in Donetsk oblast last month with members of the Foreign Affairs Committee, there was some sniper fire across the line of contact from Russian supporting forces. What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of false flag operations in recent days and indeed recent hours?

Mr Wallace: We must not forget that Ukraine has had 10,000 people killed since the invasion of Donbas. Often weekly or monthly on that line of control, this affects young men and women who are simply guarding their border. The false flag operations have been growing, and the worrying trend that we have seen recently fits the bill and the playbook of what we can expect, as the Russian Government potentially seek to destabilise and confuse the picture. We are not confused; we know what 160,000 troops mean, and so does the international community.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Maintaining a diplomatic focus is crucial at this time, but will the Government say what diplomatic focus they are bringing to Russian allies across the world? I have not heard the Defence Secretary talk about that.

Mr Wallace: The marked difference with Russia is that it does not have any allies. Belarus is its only ally. By your friends you shall be judged, and Belarus is it. This is one of the problems for Russia: it fails to recognise that international alliances are the sign of a civilised society and human rights. If you want to be on your own and stuff everyone else, you end up like North Korea. We will try to use Russia's allies, and we are certainly trying people who have more influence than others, but fundamentally it is going to be in the mind of President Putin what he does next.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): To what extent does my right hon. Friend believe that the undignified withdrawal from Afghanistan by ourselves and our allies has emboldened President Putin and contributed to setting in train the events that are now unfolding on the Ukraine border?

Mr Wallace: President Putin wrote his article last July, before the Afghanistan withdrawal, and I think that that is the biggest symbol of what his ambitions were. But it is absolutely the case that people who do not agree with our values will sniff a lack of resolve and take action. That is why we have to be resolved.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): What assessment have the Government made of the threat against vulnerable minorities in Ukraine such as religious or ethnic minorities or members of the LGBTQ+ community? What discussions have the Government had with international allies about preventing widespread human rights abuses in the event of an invasion?

Mr Wallace: In the event of an invasion, it does not matter whether you are a minority or a majority. The Russian Government's attitude to those people who disagree with them either at home or in another country is woeful and dangerous.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Given the Russian military action in Transnistria, does the Secretary of State agree that Moldova is also at risk from the Russians? Have there been discussions with the Moldovan Government?

Mr Wallace: Lots of countries are at risk from an emboldened President Putin. One of the reasons we are where we are today is that, post-2014 and 2015, the west was maybe not tough enough on that initial invasion. Moldova and many other countries, including smaller countries in NATO and Bosnia and Herzegovina, are a cause for concern, and we must recognise that now is not the time to take our eye off the ball in relation to places that are far away and of which we sometimes know nothing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his answers to the questions. With the latest news regarding Russian Security Council meetings that invasion is imminent, will the Secretary of State underline what human aid support is available for the ordinary decent people of Ukraine? What has been done to provide medical supplies for civilian casualties, whose numbers will inevitably be high when civilian militias are giving young and old people with no weapons training arms to try to save their country?

Mr Wallace: First, we should have real admiration for the bravery of many of those people. Those who saw the President of Ukraine's speech in Ukraine will know that it was almost a desperate attempt to rally people to be more supportive. A number of countries, including Germany, have supported with field hospitals and medical assistance. That is as important as lethal aid. We will do what we can, and I know that many other nations are doing so.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for the stance and leadership that he has taken on preserving the international rules-based system. Will he comment on a specific loophole relating to where Russia gets its money from? Under the International Monetary Fund's special drawing rights, \$650 billion was allocated to states around the world last year, and Russia got \$17.5 billion. I and my US counterpart, Congressman Hill from Little Rock, wrote to our respective Governments asking them to put

conditions on IMF SDR allocations. Will the Secretary of State now relook at that so that we can consider all the loopholes along with firm sanctions?

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury is here and will have heard the question, which I will be delighted to refer to the Treasury.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Russia is clearly mounting a massive disinformation campaign, especially through social media. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is vital that we and our allies communicate very clearly to Russians, Ukrainians and our domestic audiences that our actions and NATO's actions are simply about Ukraine's right to self-determination and sovereignty and are essential to maintaining peace in Europe?

Mr Wallace: Our actions are about the right to choose. Do not just take it from me; take it from the President of Finland, who made an outstanding speech on new year's day about this right.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): History proves that conflict between near-peer or peer adversaries gets very ugly. Although I accept that NATO's potential for direct intervention is limited due to article 5, what planning is there for a possible cross-border refugee and humanitarian catastrophe?

Mr Wallace: It is incredibly important that NATO seeks to use the extra troops to provide resilience, reassurance and containment. One reason why we have up to 400 Royal Marines in Poland is to assist Poland should a catastrophe happen and huge numbers of refugees pour across the border. I urge the European Commission to make deep plans about what it will do about potentially massive migrant flows, the like and scale of which we have not seen since the second world war.

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

Living with Covid-19

4.36 pm

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on our strategy for living with covid. Before I begin, I know the whole House will join me in sending our best wishes to Her Majesty the Queen for a full and swift recovery.

It is a reminder that this virus has not gone away but, because of the efforts we have made as a country over the past two years, we can now deal with it in a very different way by moving from Government restrictions to personal responsibility, so that we protect ourselves without losing our liberties, and by maintaining our contingency capabilities so that we can respond rapidly to any new variant.

The UK was the first country in the world to administer an approved vaccine, and the first European nation to protect half its population with at least one dose. Having made the decision to refocus our NHS this winter on the campaign to get boosted now, we were the first major European nation to boost half our population, too. And it is because of the extraordinary success of this vaccination programme that we have been able to lift our restrictions earlier than other comparable countries—opening up last summer while others remained closed, and keeping things open this winter when others shut down again—making us one of the most open economies and societies in Europe, with the fastest growth anywhere in the G7 last year.

While the pandemic is not over, we have now passed the peak of the omicron wave, with cases falling, hospitalisations in England now fewer than 10,000 and still falling, and the link between infection and severe disease substantially weakened. Over 71% of all adults in England are now boosted, including 93% of those aged 70 or over. Together with the treatments and scientific understanding of the virus we have built up, we now have sufficient levels of immunity to complete the transition from protecting people with Government interventions to relying on vaccines and treatments as our first line of defence.

As we have throughout the past two years, we will continue to work closely with the devolved Administrations as they decide how to take forward their own plans. Today's strategy shows how we will structure our approach in England around four principles. First, we will remove all remaining domestic restrictions in law. From this Thursday, 24 February, we will end the legal requirement to self-isolate following a positive test, and so we will also end self-isolation support payments, although covid provisions for statutory sick pay can still be claimed for a further month. We will end routine contact tracing, and no longer ask fully vaccinated close contacts and those under 18 to test daily for seven days. We will also remove the legal requirement for close contacts who are not fully vaccinated to self-isolate. Until 1 April, we will still advise people who test positive to stay at home, but after that we will encourage people with covid-19 symptoms to exercise personal responsibility, just as we encourage people who may have flu to be considerate to others.

It is only because levels of immunity are so high and deaths are now, if anything, below where we would normally expect for this time of year that we can lift these restrictions. And it is only because we know

omicron is less severe that testing for omicron on the colossal scale we have been doing is much less important and much less valuable in preventing serious illness. We should be proud that the UK has established the biggest testing programme per person of any large country in the world. This came at vast cost. The testing, tracing and isolation budget in 2020-21 exceeded the entire budget of the Home Office; it cost a further £15.7 billion in this financial year, and £2 billion in January alone, at the height of the omicron wave. We must now scale this back.

From today, we are removing the guidance for staff and students in most education and childcare settings to undertake twice-weekly asymptomatic testing. And from 1 April, when winter is over and the virus will spread less easily, we will end free symptomatic and asymptomatic testing for the general public. We will continue to provide free symptomatic tests to the oldest age groups and those most vulnerable to covid. And in line with the practice in many other countries, we are working with retailers to ensure that everyone who wants to can buy a test. From 1 April, we will also no longer recommend the use of voluntary covid-status certification, although the NHS app will continue to allow people to indicate their vaccination status for international travel. The Government will also expire all temporary provisions in the Coronavirus Act 2020. Of the original 40, 20 have already expired and 16 will expire on 24 March. The last four, relating to innovations in public service, will expire six months later, after we have made those improvements permanent via other means.

Secondly, we will continue to protect the most vulnerable with targeted vaccines and treatments. The UK Government have procured enough doses of vaccine to anticipate a wide range of possible Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation recommendations. Today, we are taking further action to guard against a possible resurgence of the virus, accepting JCVI advice for a new spring booster offered to those aged 75 and over, to older care home residents, and to those over 12 who are immunosuppressed. The UK is also leading the way on antivirals and therapeutics, with our Antivirals Taskforce securing a supply of almost 5 million, which is more per head than any other country in Europe.

Thirdly, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies advises that there is considerable uncertainty about the future path of the pandemic, and there may of course be significant resurgences. SAGE is certain that there will be new variants, and it is very possible that those will be worse than omicron. So we will maintain our resilience to manage and respond to those risks, including our world-leading Office for National Statistics survey, which will allow us to continue tracking the virus in granular detail, with regional and age breakdowns helping us to spot surges as and where they happen. And our laboratory networks will help us understand the evolution of the virus and identify any changes in characteristics.

We will prepare and maintain our capabilities to ramp up testing. We will continue to support other countries in developing their own surveillance capabilities, because a new variant can emerge anywhere. We will meet our commitment to donate 100 million vaccine doses by June, as our part of the agreement at the UK's G7 summit to provide a billion doses to vaccinate the world over the next year. In all circumstances, our aim

will be to manage and respond to future risks through more routine public health interventions, with pharmaceutical interventions as the first line of defence.

Fourthly, we will build on the innovation that has defined the best of our response to the pandemic. The vaccines taskforce will continue to ensure that the UK has access to effective vaccines as they become available, and has already secured contracts with manufacturers trialling bi-valent vaccines, which would provide protection against covid variants. The therapeutics taskforce will continue to support seven national priority clinical trial platforms focused on prevention, novel treatments and treatments for long-covid. We are refreshing our biosecurity strategy to protect the UK against natural zoonosis and accidental laboratory leaks, as well as the potential for biological threats emanating from state and non-state actors.

Building on the five-point plan that I set out at the UN and the agreements reached at the UK's G7 last year, we are working with our international partners on future pandemic preparedness, including through a new pandemic treaty; an effective early warning system or global pandemic radar; and a mission to make safe and effective diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines available within the first 100 days of a future pandemic threat being identified. We will host a global pandemic preparedness summit next month.

Covid will not suddenly disappear, so those who would wait for a total end to this war before lifting the remaining regulations would be restricting the liberties of the British people for a long time to come. This Government do not believe that that is right or necessary. Restrictions take a heavy toll on our economy, our society, our mental wellbeing and the life chances of our children, and we do not need to pay that cost any longer. We have a population that is protected by the biggest vaccination programme in our history; we have the antivirals, the treatments and the scientific understanding of this virus; and we have the capabilities to respond rapidly to any resurgence or new variant.

It is time that we got our confidence back. We do not need laws to compel people to be considerate to others. We can rely on our sense of responsibility towards one another, providing practical advice in the knowledge that people will follow it to avoid infecting loved ones and others. So let us learn to live with this virus and continue protecting ourselves without restricting our freedoms. In that spirit, I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) *indicated dissent.*

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Mr Sheerman, please!

The statement was important and the Prime Minister ran over time, so I am more than happy for the Opposition leaders to run over as well.

4.48 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I start by sending my condolences to the family of Christopher Stalford? Christopher was a dedicated servant of the people of South Belfast and his loss will be deeply felt.

I also send our best wishes to Her Majesty the Queen; as the Prime Minister said, the whole House wishes her a speedy recovery.

I thank the Prime Minister for the advance copy of his statement and for the briefing earlier this afternoon.

Huge efforts have been made over the past two years and we would not be where we are today without the heroism of our NHS and key workers, without those who pioneered and rolled out the vaccines and without the sacrifices that people made every day to follow the rules and protect our public health. We must honour the collective sacrifices of the British people and do everything possible to prevent a return to the loss and lockdowns that we have seen over the past two years.

The Prime Minister promised to present a plan for living with covid, but all we have today is yet more chaos and disarray: not enough to prepare us for the new variants that may yet develop and an approach that seems to think that living with covid means simply ignoring it. This morning, he could not even persuade his own Health Secretary to agree to the plan, so what confidence can the public have that this is the right approach?

Let me be clear: the Labour party does not want to see restrictions in place for a moment longer than necessary—*[Interruption.]* Mr Speaker, we have to take the public with us, and that requires clarity—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I call on Members to show some respect. Just as I expect the Prime Minister to be heard in silence, so, too, should the Leader of the Opposition. If you do not wish to be in here, there is plenty of room outside this Chamber. I suggest that you start using it, and I will be helping you on your way. Let us have silence.

Keir Starmer: We have to take the public with us, and that requires clarity about why decisions are being made. Will the Prime Minister publish the scientific evidence behind his decision to remove the legal requirement to self-isolate, including the impact on the clinically extremely vulnerable for whom lockdown has never ended?

Having come this far, I know that the British people will continue to act responsibly and that they will do the right thing: testing and then isolating if positive. What I cannot understand is why the Prime Minister is taking away the tools that will help them to do that. Free tests cannot continue forever, but if you are 2-1 up with 10 minutes to go, you do not sub off one of your best defenders.

The Prime Minister is also removing self-isolation support payments, which allow many people to isolate, and weakening sick pay. These are decisions that will hit the lowest paid and the most insecure workers the hardest, including care workers, who got us through the toughest parts of the pandemic. It is all very well advising workers to self-isolate, but that will not work unless all workers have the security of knowing that they can afford to do so.

The Prime Minister mentioned surveillance and the ONS infection survey. This is crucial to ensuring that we can ramp up testing and vaccination if the virus returns, so can the Prime Minister confirm that he has put the funding in place to ensure that the ONS infection

[Keir Starmer]

survey will not see reduced capacity and that it will be able to track the virus with the same degree of detail as it can today? We cannot turn off Britain's radar before the war is won. "Ignorance is bliss" is not a responsible approach to a deadly virus. It actually risks undoing all the hard-won progress that the British people have achieved over the last two years.

The Labour party has published a comprehensive plan for living well with covid. Our plan would see us learn the lessons of the past two years and be prepared for new variants. The Prime Minister's approach will leave us vulnerable. Where is the plan to secure the UK's supply of testing? Why are schools still not properly ventilated? There is no doubt that, as a nation, we need to move on from covid. People need to know that their liberties are returning and returning for good, but this is a half-baked announcement from a Government paralysed by chaos and incompetence. It is not a plan to live well with covid.

The Prime Minister: I really thought that this would be the moment when the Leader of the Opposition ended his run of making the wrong call on every single one of the big decisions. Time and again, he has had the chance to back the Government on the big decisions, but, I am afraid, he has got it wrong.

Let me turn to some of the points that the Leader of the Opposition has made. The scientific evidence for what we are doing today is amply there in the figures for the rates of infection that I have outlined today and in all the data that is freely available to Members of the House. Members can see what is happening with infection rates, with mortality and with what omicron is doing across the country.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman asks about the clinically extremely vulnerable, which is, of course, an entirely reasonable question. What we will do is make sure that they continue to be protected with priority access to therapeutics and to vaccines.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman also asks about testing, which is absolutely satirical because week after week, month after month, I have listened to the Labour party complaining about NHS test and trace, denouncing the cost—did you not hear them, Mr Speaker?—of NHS test and trace. Now they want to continue with it when we do not need to go on with it in the way we currently are.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman asks about our domestic ability to manufacture tests, as though he does not know that we have in this country now one of the biggest manufacturers of lateral flow tests in Europe. This is a Leader of the Opposition who, as I say, has shown an absolutely ferocious grip of the wrong end of the stick. He never ceases to amaze. He was totally wrong on 19 July, when he said we should not open up on 19 July. The Labour party said we needed a roadmap back into lockdown during December. The Labour party wanted—the right hon. and learned Gentleman voted for it several times—to stay in the European Medicines Agency. Contrary to his denials in this House, he voted several times to do so. He has been consistently wrong on all the big calls. He was wrong then; he is wrong now. We are moving forward in a balanced, sensible and proportionate way, moving away from

legal compulsion in a way that I think the British people understand, and trusting in them and in their great sense of personal responsibility.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): I support today's announcement, which is a tribute to British science and to the Government's leadership in the vaccine programme. Does the Prime Minister agree that when it comes to future pandemics, the real danger zone is those early months when we do not have a vaccine against a new virus and that, in that context, it is about not just whether the NHS can cope, but whether the NHS can cope without switching off other vital, life-saving treatments? If he does agree, it is not enough just to say that we have more doctors and nurses than we had before; we must also ensure we have enough doctors for the future. If he has plans for that, will he please tell the House how he will make sure that we are training enough of them?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend returns to a theme he has mentioned several times. We have a vast plan to recruit more nurses and more doctors than ever before, and there already are more in the NHS than at any time in our history. We have 45,000 more healthcare professionals this year than there were last year, and we will continue to fund them.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): This statement was billed as the Prime Minister's moment of pride, but it is clear that this morning was a moment of panic for this Government. Disagreement across Whitehall and the lack of any serious engagement with the devolved nations show that these decisions are bereft of science or consultation. It appears that these dangerous choices are purely political and have been made up on the hoof—another symptom of a Government in turmoil.

The illogical reality of UK finance means that these decisions, made for England by a failing Prime Minister, affect the money the devolved nations have to provide testing. It is unacceptable that the ability to protect—[*Interruption.*] I hear "Money!", but we are talking about protecting the people of Scotland, something that this Prime Minister is turning his back on. It is unacceptable that the ability to protect our population can be imperilled on the basis of a political decision taken by a Prime Minister in crisis. His decisions directly affect whether Scotland has the funding required to keep its people safe. That is the ridiculous reality of devolution, but it is a reality that must be addressed.

Will the Prime Minister now confirm what the residual funding for testing will be, to enable the Scottish Government to pick up the pieces of this chaotic withdrawal of support? It makes the case for Scotland to take the necessary measures to keep our people safe. We need the financial ability to make our own choices, and that only comes with independence. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: I will also hear the right hon. Gentleman in silence. I do not need the barracking. He certainly does not need it and I do not need it.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

PCR testing, the legal requirement to self-isolate and access to lateral flow testing have been instrumental in containing the virus. As we move forward to live with covid, these are the very safeguards that support a return to normal life. These short-sighted decisions

have long-term implications. They also hamper vital surveillance efforts and impede the ability to respond to new variants. The reality is that we have a Prime Minister beset by chaos and mired in a police investigation for breaking his own covid laws.

The Prime Minister *indicated dissent.*

Ian Blackford: He can shake his head, but that is the reality—a Prime Minister who has no moral authority to lead and is desperately seeking to appease his Back Benchers. We know that this reckless statement flies in the face of advice from scientists at the World Health Organisation. That is because this statement is not about protecting the public; it is about the Prime Minister scrambling to save his own skin.

The Prime Minister: Well, you would not believe it from what the right hon. Gentleman has just said, but the co-operation between the UK Government and the Scottish authorities has been outstanding and will continue to be outstanding. He asked about free tests and how they are to be paid for. This is very important. The free tests will of course continue until the beginning of April. Of course, if people want to, they can continue beyond then. I have set out for the House the reasons why we think it is much more sensible to focus on surveillance and spotting new variants, and to put our investment into that rather than mass testing. He has access to the £41 billion record settlement that he has under Barnett. He also has access to hundreds of millions from the health and care levy—the only astonishing thing is that he voted against it.

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): I warmly welcome the Prime Minister's statement. He will be aware of growing international evidence that lockdowns have been largely ineffective in preventing covid mortality, and we are acutely aware of the massive damage that lockdowns have done economically and to the non-covid health of people. Will he review pandemic planning for the future to make sure that these crucial lessons are learned?

The Prime Minister: Yes, my hon. Friend is right to draw attention to all sorts of studies about the efficacy of lockdowns. We will look at all the evidence. I happen to think that the collective actions of the British public were indispensable in saving many, many thousands of lives. But I am sure that all the evidence will be looked at in the course of the inquiry.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): New antiviral drugs have made a huge difference to the treatment of covid—they are indeed, as the Prime Minister says, the first line of defence—but they work best when given early. At the moment, one of the requirements in order to qualify to get an antiviral drug is that the person has tested positive for covid. If he is going to get rid of free lateral flow tests, how are people going to get access to those medicines?

The Prime Minister: With great respect to the right hon. Gentleman, people who are symptomatic will of course continue to have access to testing.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Let us have birthday person Sara Britcliffe.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Our historic vaccine programme is the reason that we are in this position today. I want to take this opportunity to thank everybody involved in Hyndburn and Haslingden for the roll-out of the vaccination programme, and those who have had to deal with the restrictions for longer than most. Does the Prime Minister agree that this is exactly why we must learn to live with the virus, because of how damaging restrictions can be to mental health and wellbeing?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have to set all these things—the cost of lockdowns, and the cost in terms of people's mental health and wellbeing—against the difficult decisions we have to make about opening up our society, and I think the House understands that this is a balanced decision that is entirely right.

I should just clarify to the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) that those who are vulnerable who are symptomatic will of course continue to have access to testing. I should have said that in my answer to his question.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): In a recent survey, a majority of NHS leaders agreed that it was not the right time to end free testing for the public. Why does the Prime Minister disagree with them, and what scientific advice has he considered to come to this decision, which could have a real impact on the NHS elective recovery plan?

The Prime Minister: I hear the anxieties of people, but I have to say that I think this is the balanced and the right decision. On testing, I just remind the hon. Lady of what those on the Opposition Benches have previously said about the cost of testing. We now think that the best thing, given the severity of omicron, is to focus on surveillance and to use the huge funds that we are currently dedicating to mass testing on electives and all the other things that we need to do.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): Sir Andrew Pollard of the Oxford Vaccine Group said this morning that it does not make a big difference whether the decision to lift these restrictions is taken now or in a few weeks' time. It is therefore not clear what the purpose of waiting any longer would be. However, one of the things we do know is that we sometimes did not have the necessary testing capacity when we needed it most acutely. If the ongoing surveillance were to throw up a variant that was more dangerous than omicron, how quickly could we stand up and deploy mass testing again?

The Prime Minister: That is exactly the right question. That is why we are putting so much emphasis on surveillance—on the Office for National Statistics, with its amazing granular ability to detect what is going on in local areas, as well as other forms of surveillance. We want to spot the new variant of concern as soon as we can, and then we want to surge our testing capacity in the way we did before—indeed much faster, since it is all ready to go. We will have stockpiles, we will keep our

[*The Prime Minister*]

labs in readiness and we will be able to surge when necessary. But from April it will not be the right time to continue with mass testing in the way we have.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I join the Prime Minister in sending our very best wishes to Her Majesty the Queen and in hoping that she gets well soon.

Millions of family carers across our country are taking regular lateral flow tests to ensure that they do not pass covid to their vulnerable loved ones. The Prime Minister now says that these family carers must pay for covid tests out of their own pocket, even though many of them can hardly make ends meet at the moment. Is he really telling people that they must choose between money for the weekly shop or a test so that they do not accidentally take this contagious virus into their loved ones' homes? Surely such a tax on caring would be unfair and unjust?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the need to protect care homes and those who work in care homes. He should wait until March, when we will be setting out in more detail those who will continue to be entitled to free tests.

Mr Speaker: The man for the rules—Matt Hancock.

Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. Almost two years ago now this House voted unanimously on the statutory measures necessary to keep people safe during the pandemic. I agree with the Prime Minister that, thanks to the vaccines, those measures are no longer necessary and we are the first major country in the world to be past the pandemic. However, is it not extraordinary that, despite the consensus on restrictions back then, the consensus on giving people back their freedom, which is often so much harder, and on trusting in personal responsibility appears to exist only on the Government side of the House?

The Prime Minister: Yes, and it is a great shame that the Opposition cannot find it in themselves to support what I think is a balanced and proportionate approach that recognises that covid has not gone away and that we cannot throw caution to the winds.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Given everything else the Prime Minister has said this afternoon, why is he keeping the bureaucratic and irritating passenger locator form when the rest of Europe can already travel freely by showing a vaccine certificate?

The Prime Minister: That is a welcome call for liberty from the Opposition Benches. I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that we already have one of the most open travel systems in the world. I understand his grievance against the passenger locator form, and we will certainly review it by Easter.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): It is great news that our freedoms are being restored, so will the Prime Minister now bring the same focus and Government innovation shown on this topic to vanquish the cost of living crisis so that more people have enough money to enjoy the freedoms?

The Prime Minister: You bet!

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): We do not know how well the vaccine works on immunocompromised people, and they and their loved ones will rightly be extremely worried. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, delays in getting test results are delaying access to lifesaving antivirals, so can we allow the immunocompromised to have a supply of antivirals at home? If pharmaceutical interventions save lives, let us ensure that people can access them as soon as possible.

The Prime Minister: We have already secured more antivirals and therapeutics per head than any other country in Europe. We need to ensure that the clinically extremely vulnerable have access to them, and 1.3 million of them have already been sent tests.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): While the threat from covid has changed—thanks in no small part to the outstanding vaccination efforts led by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister—he will know that the effects on local hospitals will last for years to come. Does he agree that now is the right time to invest in upgrades to hospitals such as Scunthorpe's?

The Prime Minister: Now is exactly the right time to invest in hospitals such as Scunthorpe's and across the country. I cannot commit to the particular project that my hon. Friend describes, but that is the kind of project, 48 of which we are progressing across the country.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I welcome the lifting of restrictions and hope that the Prime Minister will engage with the Health Minister in Northern Ireland to ensure that the same measures are exercised there. The Prime Minister said that it is important that we get our confidence back, but we have lived through two years of fear being instilled in the population. What nudge tactics does the Prime Minister now intend to use to ensure that confidence is restored and that people can get back to work, back into shops and restaurants, and back doing the things that make life enjoyable?

The Prime Minister: I begin by echoing the condolences for the DUP MLA Christopher Stalford.

I wholly agree with the right hon. Gentleman's sentiments. We do need people to get their confidence back, as I said the other day. People can set an example—[*Interruption.*] The Opposition Front Bench should wait and see. People can set an example by going to work.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): May I cheer up the Prime Minister by welcoming what he has to say today? [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] The Leader of the Opposition's comment that the Government had no plan to deal with this was destroyed by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who pointed out that antiviral therapeutics are incredibly effective—95% effective—against this disease. Can the Prime Minister confirm that we already have 2.75 million courses of such therapeutics available to us?

The Prime Minister: No, I cannot confirm that, but I can tell my right hon. Friend that we have twice that amount. We have 4.9 million doses.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Living with covid does not mean ignoring it, and the Prime Minister will be aware that lifting restrictions today flies in the face of advice from many NHS leaders and health experts, including the British Medical Association and the World Health Organisation. Saying that everyone should take personal responsibility, while at the same time taking away their means of taking that personal responsibility, is utterly perverse. What would he say to those of my constituents who are clinically extremely vulnerable, for whom his freedom day is a day of profound fear and loss of freedom? Will he clarify his response to the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), because the issue is free testing for not just people in care homes, but, at the very least, the almost 7 million carers up and down the country?

The Prime Minister: On that, the hon. Member should wait, as I said to the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey). On the clinically extremely vulnerable, I think it is very important to remember that we will continue—as we have done throughout the pandemic—to look after them with all the therapeutics that we can offer, and with vaccines where that is appropriate. As the House knows, the shielding programme ended in September. What people need to recognise with the CEV—the clinically extremely vulnerable—is that we should treat them with caution, just as anybody with any respiratory disease should treat the clinically extremely vulnerable with caution, respect them and act with responsibility.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): I fully endorse the Prime Minister's statement, which is a significant step forward. However, while we want to get more confidence back into the country, people will also want consistency, so that they can plan ahead. To that end, will he look at what we do with schools, and education more generally? In particular, will he look at making them an essential part of our national infrastructure, so that on future occasions when we consider restrictions across the country, schools, nurseries, colleges and universities are at the very back of the queue, and we make sure that what happened during this pandemic—the lost learning—does not happen again?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and that is why we are ensuring that schools are as covid-secure as possible. We are sending out 350,000 CO₂ monitors and 9,000 air cleaning units; those are among the steps that we are taking to protect schools. It is very important that we should get the message over to everybody that schools are safe—one of the many things that the Leader of the Opposition got wrong.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): The Prime Minister, in outlining his reckless plan for living with covid, announced that he is relying on the British public to apply personal responsibility when it comes to the virus. Does this also apply to the Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member says it is a “reckless” plan; that is exactly the word that the right hon. and learned Leader of the Opposition used to describe the 19 July openings. I wonder whether she still believes that.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I will take the Prime Minister's statement, if I may, as his application to join the Covid Recovery Group. He is very welcome indeed; I only wish it had been made sooner. All the lockdowns and the serious restrictions were implemented using the Public Health Act (Control of Disease) 1984. Some of those restrictions were made by ministerial decree, and were approved by Parliament only retrospectively. If we are to believe that next time will be different, why does this plan not include proposals to change the Act now, in order to make Ministers more accountable to Parliament, rather than our kicking this into the long grass and waiting for the results of the covid public inquiry?

The Prime Minister: I know that my right hon. Friend is a staunch Thatcherite; he will recall that it was Margaret Thatcher who promulgated the public health Act in 1984, and it has served this country well for a long time. I will consider the point that he makes—it is a valuable one—but I think it may also be something that the inquiry will want to consider itself.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): With 38,000 new covid cases today, can the Prime Minister explain which public health experts advised abandoning testing and isolation, and when will that advice be published?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member very much. As she knows, cases are falling, hospitalisations are falling, and the number of excess deaths from omicron is actually in negative territory. We consult a wide range of scientific opinion, including the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies and, clearly, the chief scientific adviser and the chief medical officer, but the decisions are for Ministers, and we take them.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Unlike the Opposition, the Prime Minister got all the big decisions right throughout the pandemic. Does he agree that we should never return to a full lockdown, and that any isolation should be targeted: it should be the clinically vulnerable, the elderly, and the Labour Front Bench?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has put it brilliantly and succinctly, and I have nothing to add.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Liberty is always better than the alternative, as long as everybody can share in that liberty equally, so the anxiety for some of us, especially those who represent very poor communities, is that if free testing is ended, those who are symptomatic may end up having to pay £59 or £119 for a PCR test. On top of that, they may be in a job where, if they do the responsible thing and stay away from work, they do not get any money at all, or get pathetic sick pay. If we are to make sure that everybody shares in this liberty equally, must not the poorest in Britain get a better deal?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, but first, statutory sick pay will be available, and secondly, if I may say so, I think he underestimates people's sense of responsibility and willingness to do the right thing by others.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I welcome what the Prime Minister has set out, and especially his commitment to Scunbury hospital. I also welcome his continuation of the Office for National Statistics survey study, not least because my mam and dad have been taking part in it, and it has given them something to do throughout the course of covid other than text me constantly. On NHS testing, as the Prime Minister knows, I work in the NHS and I like getting my test before I book on duty; it makes me feel safe when I go into care homes or elsewhere to attend patients. When he sets out how testing will continue in March, will he clearly set out the situation for testing NHS workers?

The Prime Minister: First, may I thank my hon. Friend very much for his service in the NHS throughout the pandemic? I have seen him in action. On his point about the NHS, that will be for the NHS itself to determine.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister mentioned that this is about personal responsibility, and it is. It is about our personal responsibility not to inadvertently pass on the virus to someone who is vulnerable; it is about our personal responsibility to do the right thing if we have symptoms, or have covid; and it is about our personal responsibility to think about our neighbours, our friends, our carers—the people who need those restrictions to be lifted. What does the Prime Minister have to say to my vulnerable constituents in Vauxhall who are concerned that this personal responsibility that the Prime Minister wants us to take might inadvertently lead to their catching covid?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is right to focus on personal responsibility, but the other part of the strategy is the vaccinations. This is a vaccine-led strategy, and that is what enables us now to rely on people's personal responsibility as well.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement, and the way he set out the argument on living with covid in terms of respecting and restoring people's freedoms while protecting public health. The key advance we have for the future is the mapping exercise, and vaccination centres are already in place, including in Medway. Will the Prime Minister thank the excellent volunteers and NHS staff in Medway, and look at the bid for a new Medway hospital in my constituency?

The Prime Minister: I had better be careful what I say about more hospitals; we want to build as many hospitals as we possibly can, but we will have to look at my hon. Friend's plan. I do want to thank the Medway volunteers; I want to thank everybody still involved in the vaccination campaign. There are still millions of people who have not yet had their booster, and I urge them to get it.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is lovely to have the Prime Minister with us today, and that he is not filling in his questionnaires or busy having his meetings with the police. Can he confirm or deny the reports of a sell-off plan for the Vaccines Manufacturing and Innovation Centre, which was founded on the values and mission of people like Dr Sarah Gilbert, who invented the AstraZeneca vaccine? There are rumours

going about that this public-private enterprise will be sold off to the private sector. Will the Prime Minister confirm or deny that that is the Government's intention? The essence of the reason why we were ahead with the vaccine was the excellence and values of those wonderful British scientists who worked their socks off for this. Don't just sell it off.

The Prime Minister: I might add that one of the most important factors in the success of the vaccine roll-out was the private sector. It was private sector investment that led to the AstraZeneca vaccine and the Pfizer vaccine. We will work with the private sector to continue to develop the country's native, indigenous ability to manufacture mRNA and other types of vaccines.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): Keeping healthy people at home in isolation has had a devastating impact on lives, businesses and important life events such as weddings. I therefore welcome these changes, and the move to trust the British people and allow people to plan with confidence. Yet we all have constituents who are immunocompromised and vulnerable, such as the woman who wrote to me this morning. We care about these people; despite what Opposition Members say, they do not have a monopoly on compassion. Will my right hon. Friend reassure us again that those people will get the support that they need, that the timing is right, and that there is no point in waiting to make these changes?

The Prime Minister: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. We will ensure that those people get not just the antivirals but the tests that they need.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): That is the point on which I would like clarification from the Prime Minister. We learned today that 7 million carers will not get tests, and that money for tests for NHS and care staff will have to be found from within existing budgets, which makes waiting lists even more precarious. Will he confirm that those eligible for antivirals—for which they will have to pay—are those who are over 12, at high risk, and have symptoms or test positive for covid-19? I see the Health Secretary helping him out. Clarification on that would be really helpful.

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Lady waits a little longer, she will get a breakdown of how we propose to support the most vulnerable. We will support them, as we have done throughout the pandemic.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Experts will argue for years about whether we made the right choices. Some of us, for what it is worth, would have liked a lighter touch. However, one thing is certain, and we know this from independent testimony that has emerged from a former adviser to the Prime Minister: but for the Prime Minister's freedom-loving, libertarian instincts, these lockdowns would have been much longer and much worse, with incalculable consequences for the young and for people's mental health. Can we rely on him to rule out any more lockdowns in the coming decade as he remains Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: What you can certainly rely on, Mr Speaker, is the Government taking the tough decisions to protect the British people. We will have a vaccine and science-led approach to dealing with the pandemic.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has come to the House unable to state whether carers in our communities, visiting home after home in one day—often the homes of older people and the clinically extremely vulnerable—will still have access to free tests to keep themselves and their patients and clients safe. He said that testing for NHS staff will be a matter for the NHS. Surely he can do better than that. The NHS and carers need to plan ahead. Will he come clean with the House about his intentions?

The Prime Minister: What we are doing is moving away from systematic mass testing of large numbers of people, which is no longer the right way to deal with omicron, to a surveillance-led approach. Of course, we will continue to look after the most vulnerable and those who need it.

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I welcome the path to freedom that the Prime Minister has set out. I am sure that, like the Leader of the Opposition, the Welsh First Minister will condemn the plan today, but will in about two weeks present this same plan as his own. Will the Prime Minister reach out to the Labour First Minister and the other devolved Administrations—we have worked well with them, when ugly nationalism is put aside—to get those freedoms for residents in Montgomeryshire as quickly as possible?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. Indeed, as I extend the hand of co-operation to our friends in the Scottish Administration, I hope the Welsh Administration in Cardiff will see the way forward. As I have said many times before, the similarities in our approach greatly outweigh the differences.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): It is hard to imagine that this is the Prime Minister who missed five Cobra meetings at the start of the pandemic. My constituent who spoke to me yesterday is immunosuppressed. She anticipated the difficulties that the Prime Minister is having over testing for people who are clinically vulnerable. She wanted to know whether she would have ready access to free tests and anti-virals should she test positive. What is the situation that those people have been plunged into today?

The Prime Minister: The answer to those questions is yes and yes. The 1.3 million clinically extremely vulnerable will of course be given access to free testing. They will also have access to the largest quantity of anti-virals and therapeutics per head of any European population.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): With a world-leading successful vaccination programme, the fastest growth rate in the G7, and in my constituency some of the highest employment we have seen in generations, does that not demonstrate that when it comes to the big decisions during the covid pandemic this Prime Minister and the Government he leads have got them right?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I have to say. I am casting modesty, if not caution, to the winds. Yes, we have got it right, although there have been some very difficult decisions. It would have been nice today, finally, to have had the support of the Opposition.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I am sure the whole House will join me in paying tribute to my constituent, Jamal Edwards, a musical pioneer taken from us way too young yesterday.

The Prime Minister justifies this crowd-pleaser for his own MPs by warning us about damage to the economy. The Office for National Statistics says that 1.3 million of our fellow citizens are suffering from the debilitating condition of long covid, which has rendered 396,000 people economically inactive. It causes dysfunctionality and ages people by 10 years. What is the Prime Minister doing to advance research and treatment into this condition? How does today's exercise help those people?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to mention the problem of long covid. We have invested £224 million in expanding NHS treatment of long covid and we are putting another £50 million into researching that syndrome.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I very much welcome the Prime Minister's statement today: a return to liberty, so we can further grow our economy and tackle other health conditions. Can he say a little more about what targeted support will be provided to those who are immunosuppressed and immune-compromised, such as those with blood cancer?

The Prime Minister: As I told the House, we have secured supplies of monoclonal antibodies in record numbers. We will also ensure that those who are immunosuppressed have access to testing to see whether they need the therapeutics.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The deep irony of this Prime Minister lecturing us on personal responsibility will not be lost on the public watching at home. To misquote Kevin Bridges, personal responsibility won't pay the bills.

The Prime Minister called for a four nations approach time and time again, bemoaning any deviation in approach from Cardiff, Belfast or Edinburgh. Now he is recklessly and dangerously dropping all restrictions in England and ending community testing without consultation or consideration of devolved needs, and flying in the face of the scientific advice he has been given. That just proves that his four nations approach has simply meant "Follow Westminster's direction, no matter how rash."

The Prime Minister: First of all, we are not dropping the testing until the beginning of April, as the hon. Gentleman knows. It is thanks only to the massive financial firepower of the UK that we have been able to run the biggest testing operation in Europe plus the fastest vaccination roll-out.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Let me ask my right hon. Friend to cast his mind back to January last year, when Chris Whitty said that there will come a time when covid will be the same as flu, from which there are 7,000 to 20,000 deaths each year. At that time, there was no comment against him from either the Labour party or the Scottish National party. Now that we have excess deaths at minus 9% of what is normal at this time, is my right hon. Friend as baffled as I am about the attitude that Labour Front Benchers now take?

The Prime Minister: Yes, actually, I am. I am genuinely surprised by the approach that the Opposition have taken today; I think that it is wrong. My hon. Friend is making an important point about the comparison with flu, because it is very important that people with any respiratory disease think about those who are clinically vulnerable and behave in a responsible and considerate way.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): This is a plan for living with covid that does not provide for older and extremely vulnerable people and which does not include schoolchildren, sick pay for working people or testing. Is this not a plan only in the same sense that the Prime Minister's birthday was not a party?

The Prime Minister: No. This is a plan that addresses every single one of those priorities: sick pay, schools, the vulnerable—this plan deals with all of them. It is the right way forward and, actually, the hon. Lady should support it.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I strongly welcome and endorse my right hon. Friend's statement today on restoring our freedoms. Does he agree that the restrictions, although necessary, have taken a very heavy toll on businesses and our society and that we have to live with the virus in the future? However, we Government Members passionately believe in trusting the people to take personal responsibility.

The Prime Minister: Beautifully put.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Are the 100 million vaccine doses that are being donated as part of the global response counted towards or in addition to the Government's 0.5% official development target? And when will they stop blocking agreement on a TRIPS—trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights—waiver so that developing countries can take vaccine response into their own hands?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is raising a very important but very difficult issue. In answer to the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), I mentioned the importance of the private sector. We need to ensure that the pharmaceutical companies have the wherewithal to make these colossal investments that offer hope for humanity.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his forbearance, because across from the Government Dispatch Box he was faced first by the vacillations of General Indecision and then by the rank opportunism of Captain Hindsight. Does he agree that if he had listened to Lieutenant Lockdown, instead of being the first major economy to unlock and having a world-leading vaccine programme, we would now be facing a Major Catastrophe?

The Prime Minister: Yes. The most important thing is that if we had taken those steps and remained in lockdown, we would not have the financial wherewithal—the firepower, the money—to pay for all the things that people now need support for, not least clearing the covid backlogs.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister says that this is a scientific decision, so will he remind the House what the current R rate or infection rate is; what it is projected to be by the start of May; and at what R rate he is willing to reintroduce testing and self-isolation? Or is it not a scientific decision?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, the rate of infections is falling and so are hospitalisations.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): One of the cruellest aspects of the pandemic has been that many people have been unable to visit their sick or even dying relatives in hospital. Visiting has still been very difficult even with the improvement in the covid situation. Will the Prime Minister make sure that this is the day when NHS visiting requirements in our hospitals go back to normal? That is the humane and compassionate thing to do.

The Prime Minister: I know that my right hon. Friend speaks for millions of people around the country. I can tell her that many, many restrictions have already been lifted, and they will continue to be lifted.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Three years ago, the Government consulted on much-needed reforms to statutory sick pay, rightly recognising that the current system is inflexible and does not reflect modern working life. Those reforms were postponed when the pandemic hit, and day one access to statutory sick pay was introduced instead. I think the Prime Minister has just announced that day one access to statutory sick pay will be withdrawn in a month's time. Will he now bring forward the much-needed and long-delayed reforms to statutory sick pay?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, statutory sick pay is only a part of what many employees already receive as part of their sick pay.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I just want to remind people that the Prime Minister was right last July when we came out of lockdown with the sensible steps that we took. He was also proved right that we were absolutely doing the right thing when we went against the grain of many other nations and ended up riding out the situation that we had at Christmas, so I entirely endorse what we are seeing today.

There have been a number of good questions about the immunosuppressed. Could I ask a slightly different one? Rather than having people wait for assessments from GPs or consultants, who are after all very busy and are not working 24/7 all the time, could we consider a 24-hour immunosuppressed hotline for advice? That would help these anxious people and give direct support as they learn to live with covid.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that extremely interesting idea, which my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary may wish to discuss with him.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am not sure that the Prime Minister understands that supporting people to self-isolate is not a restriction on their freedom; it is actually what a responsible Government do. He will know that millions of people do not qualify

for SSP at the moment and that without financial support they cannot self-isolate. Does he understand the invidious position that he is putting some people in?

The Prime Minister: Of course I understand the difficult position that some people may find themselves in, but I hope that everybody will also understand that it is our job to be responsible towards others and to avoid spreading the disease.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): One of the biggest tragedies of the pandemic has been the isolation and desperation of those living in care homes and of their families at home, many of whom joined groups such as Rights for Residents. Can the Prime Minister assure them that they will now be able to visit their loved ones in care homes, with the use of testing and other measures to keep them safe?

The Prime Minister: Yes.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): When people attend our wonderful Lewisham Hospital accident and emergency department for treatment and have a blood test, they are automatically tested for HIV unless they opt out. The oldest person to discover that she had HIV was 75 years old. I raise that point with the Prime Minister because many people still have weakened immunity and do not know it. Lifting covid restrictions further exposes people with weakened immunity to the virus. Can the Prime Minister say how he intends to protect those people?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to the immunosuppressed and those who are particularly vulnerable. They will continue to have access to free testing, plus the therapeutics that I have described.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): The British sequencing regime is one of the best in the world, with more than 13% of all tests sequenced here in this country. Can my right hon. Friend say what steps are being taken to ensure that despite reductions in testing, our sequencing capacity in this country will stay one of the best in the world?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly assure my hon. Friend that we will retain that capacity.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In order to have good surveillance, the Prime Minister will need data; in order to get that data, he will need testing, particularly for looking at future variants of the virus. Can he explain where he will get that data to trace the future mutations of covid?

The Prime Minister: That is exactly what the ONS survey does.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): It is the vaccination programme led by this Prime Minister that got us to the position we are in now, and it is the vaccination programme that will keep us out of lockdown, but what we know from the pandemic is that online misinformation about the vaccines costs lives. The Prime Minister took a very strong line on this early in the

pandemic. As we continue to rely on vaccines, can he reassure me that we will not suffer online misinformation about vaccines that will continue to save lives?

The Prime Minister: Yes. One of the things that the online harms Bill does is try to tackle that kind of pernicious online disinformation.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Unless the Prime Minister publishes the full advice which says that this decision was science-led, it will confirm what we have long suspected: that he is prepared to sacrifice anything and anyone to save his own skin. He just claimed that he had been working closely with the devolved Governments on this issue, so why are the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government saying that the first they heard of this "plan" was his throwaway line during Prime Minister's questions just 10 days ago?

The Prime Minister: I should have thought that 10 days was quite a lot of notice.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I agree with the Prime Minister that now is the right time to make these changes, so may I ask him how retaining the passenger locator form can be justified, and may I ask him for a commitment to end it by Easter? That would give the travel industry a much-needed shot in the arm.

The Prime Minister: I hear my hon. Friend loud and clear. I have already heard several pleas on that matter today, and I repeat that we will be looking into it before Easter.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Covid case numbers are rising in Wandsworth, and people are very concerned about this plan. They have had to choose between eating and heating, and now they will have to choose between heating, eating and testing. There has been a flurry of reports in the media about a paralysed Cabinet arguing over what to announce here, at the eleventh hour. The Prime Minister is asking us to have confidence in a plan in which health leaders do not have confidence. Can he assure the House today that all members of the Cabinet—the full Cabinet—have confidence in this plan?

The Prime Minister: Yes, of course they do, and this plan is completely scientifically attested to. It is the right thing to do.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his important statement, and for the reassurance that he provided in it for the clinically extremely vulnerable. The Government took huge steps to support those individuals by, for instance, creating the shielding programme that delivered millions of food boxes to people's doors within a matter of weeks. It is absolutely right that we continue to stand by and support those people into the future with testing and with antivirals, as my right hon. Friend has already said today.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is quite right in what he says about the plan, and I thank him for his outstanding work, when he was responsible for local government, in helping to deliver those parcels and helping to support people in the way that he did.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I am sure that the Prime Minister has consulted the chief medical officer and the chief scientific officer for England, but consulting them is not quite the same as taking their advice. Can he confirm that he has taken their advice on the issue of ending mandatory self-isolation periods and ending testing?

The Prime Minister: I have not only consulted them for their opinions, but have taken their advice. I hope very much that after these exchanges, the hon. Member will be able to see a press conference involving both those gentlemen, and hear the questions that will no doubt be put to them as well.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): To lead is to be in a lonely place. I have seen courage today, and I want to thank my right hon. Friend for the statement that he has made. He may recall that we were not on the same side when it came to lockdown. In that context, may I gently suggest to him that were a pandemic to strike again, the Government should advise and counsel, and should not curb our freedoms?

The Prime Minister: It is fair to say that I think everyone will want to learn all the lessons from this pandemic and make sure that we take the best steps should a new variant strike us, but I have great confidence in vaccines.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): The Prime Minister is now focused on a vaccine strategy as our first line of defence. Will he assure me that he will take personal responsibility for areas such as mine that have a booster rate of only 39%, to ensure continued vaccination in our community so that my constituents are not left behind in this rush to freedom?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady makes a good point and I will do anything I can to help her. The national average for adult boosters is now about 71%, so that figure is low and we will do what we can to help.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): The data has proven that Labour and the naysayers were wrong about omicron. How important was the decision not to lock down at Christmas, building resilience in our communities and our economy, to our ability to lift restrictions today?

The Prime Minister: We have to be humble in the face of this disease. It remains a dangerous disease and we must continue to be cautious, but we also have to take balanced decisions that are right for the country. It is clear now that the 19 July decision and the decision on Christmas and the new year were correct.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Is it not the case that the decision being taken here today has nothing to do with protecting public health and everything to do with protecting this Prime Minister from his own Back Benchers?

The Prime Minister: No, the hon. Gentleman is completely wrong.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): The businesses in the market town of Thorne in my constituency are failing to benefit from the UK's fantastic growth due to

the main car park being used by a covid testing facility. With today's announcement, can the Prime Minister confirm that these facilities will now be vastly reduced or removed so that towns such as Thorne can get back to their bustling pre-pandemic norm?

The Prime Minister: I know exactly what my hon. Friend is talking about, and I am sure he speaks for many. That facility has done fantastic work, but it will be decommissioned shortly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Prime Minister for the covid-19 vaccination programmes that all the citizens of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have benefited from. I am broadly in agreement that we need to move safely forward, but will he outline whether the plans will include free lateral flow tests for the army of unpaid carers who have kept society ticking over? The indication is that one in seven of our unpaid carers in Northern Ireland need to test before they provide care for the vulnerable and for their elderly loved ones. They must therefore have access to free testing if they are to continue to provide this often overlooked but very necessary care.

The Prime Minister: I want to repeat to the House, because it is incredibly important that people understand, that the strategy for containing omicron is not to test everybody or large numbers of people; it is surveillance. We will be bringing forward particular groups to whom we want to continue to offer free tests, such as the clinically extremely vulnerable, and there will be more on that in the next few weeks.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The prize for patience and perseverance goes to Greg Smith.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement this afternoon. He is making the right call. Freedom works. Indeed, we should always cherish freedom, but as we have seen in the past when restrictions have been lifted, some bodies, particularly those with a union hand hovering over them, have continued with restrictions regardless. So, as we rightly lift these restrictions and allow others to lapse, can my right hon. Friend give a clear message that the turn towards personal responsibility is not a licence for those bodies to carry on with the restrictions regardless?

The Prime Minister: If I understand my hon. Friend correctly, he is referring to devolved Administrations—*[Interruption.]* I think that is what he was saying. The instinct for liberty burns just as brightly in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and I think the people of the whole United Kingdom will understand that we want a sensible, balanced and proportionate approach that moves away from legal compulsion—something that has been quite extraordinary for these times—and in favour of people being considerate towards others and taking personal responsibility.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Thank you. I will pause for a moment to allow people to leave in a swift and silent manner before making space for the statement from the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Storm Eunice

5.55 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the electricity disruptions as a result of Storm Eunice and set out exactly how we are working to ensure that power is restored to people's homes as quickly as possible. Storm Eunice brought severe weather, including wind gusts of up to 122 mph. That is among the highest speeds ever recorded in England. The Met Office took the unprecedented step of issuing a double red weather warning for Friday. Ensuing hurricane-force winds have caused extensive damage to buildings and trees. They have also caused power outages and widespread travel delays. After a day of disruption caused by Storm Eunice on Friday, Storm Franklin made landfall last night. It must be remembered in this difficult time that four people have tragically lost their lives in incidents related to the storms. My thoughts, and I am sure the thoughts of the whole House, are with the families and friends who have lost loved ones.

The Met Office estimates further strong gusts today, though not on the same scale as Storm Eunice. Some people, particularly in the south and east of England, have been without power for more than 72 hours. I want to reassure them that we have dedicated teams of engineers working night and day to get them reconnected as soon as possible. Continuing poor weather conditions have hampered those efforts, but I am pleased to say that, as of now, over 98% of those affected by the storms—more than 1.4 million customers—have had their power supply restored. However, as of 4 o'clock today, just under 30,000 households are still without power.

Today, the Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands), has been in Sevenoaks in Kent to see the impact of the storm and to observe repairs. This weekend, I spoke directly to leaders at Scottish and Southern Energy Networks, and today I had conversations with leading managers at UK Power Networks and Western Power Distribution. They have given me assurances that restoration is happening as quickly as possible. The UK has been particularly badly hit by storms this year, but I am pleased to say that overall, our network operators and our brave emergency services have learned lessons about how we can improve our response, and we will continue to learn those lessons.

When I commissioned the review into our response to Storm Arwen in November, I made it clear that the very long delays some people faced to be reconnected were unacceptable. I am pleased to say that, where practical, network operators have already implemented improvements to their procedures. Additionally, operators are sharing resources and ensuring that engineers are sent to the worst affected areas. Welfare provisions are in place for those who are most in need, particularly the vulnerable members of our communities. Network operators are engaged with local partners to ensure that people are being supported. Catering units are travelling to badly hit areas, and smaller welfare units are providing hot water and other facilities to people who are adversely affected. I am extremely grateful to the network operators

and the emergency responders who have been working very hard to keep people as comfortable as possible. I am aware that during Storm Arwen, the people experiencing the worst effects of the devastation had difficulty in communicating, and that people are still experiencing issues today. However, I am pleased to say that if they call their network operator by dialling 105 from their mobile, they should get a speedy response. That action will automatically route them to the right operator based on their physical location.

I believe this is the first time that three named storms have come in such quick succession, day after day, since the storm-naming convention was introduced a little less than a decade ago. This is a difficult time for many, but I have been reassured that operators are working extremely hard to make sure people are reconnected as quickly as possible, and in the next couple of days at the latest. My Department and I will continue to provide support and apply pressure, where needed, to ensure people are reconnected in a timely way.

6 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I join him in sending my condolences to the families of the victims who tragically died during Storm Eunice, and I express my sympathy to all those who have been affected by the storms. Many families have endured real hardship in these past few days, being without power for an extended period. I also know, including from my own constituency, that many others are facing an anxious time with the threat of flooding from Storm Franklin. My thoughts are with them, too.

I also join the Secretary of State in praising all the engineers, network staff and emergency service staff who have done such an important job in incredibly difficult circumstances over the past few days, as well as local authorities, which have also played an important role in the emergency response.

On the substance of the statement, first, the most important priority is to reconnect those who are still without power. I welcome what the Secretary of State said about people being reconnected by Wednesday at the latest, and I trust that he will, as he says, hold all the companies to account in mobilising all their resources across the country to make sure this happens.

Secondly, on vulnerable households, in its interim review of the response to Storm Arwen last November, BEIS noted confusion of roles and responsibilities for vulnerable customers and communities that were cut off. The Secretary of State says the arrangements are working better, and I am glad that lessons have been learned. Can he tell us how he is monitoring that and is assured of it?

Thirdly, there were unacceptable delays in the networks' compensation payments after Storm Arwen, with 10,000 customers having not been compensated six weeks after the storm. What will the Secretary of State do to ensure speedy payments on this occasion?

Fourthly, these events raise longer-term issues. Scientists tell us that we cannot necessarily attribute the ferocity of Storm Eunice to climate change, but we know that we face more intense and frequent extreme weather as a result of the climate crisis, so again it throws up the question of our resilience and security as a country.

[Edward Miliband]

After the storms in 2013, there was a clear sense of the vulnerabilities of the overhead power network and agreement that the energy networks would act. In its interim report on Storm Arwen this month, Ofgem said again that it will review the costs and benefits of the resilience of overhead lines, and the Climate Change Committee has highlighted climate risks to the power system. Does the Secretary of State agree that events this winter demonstrate the need to give greater priority to and, indeed, investment in the resilience of our power network?

More generally, the Climate Change Committee said in its five-year progress report last summer that adaptation is

“under-resourced, underfunded and often ignored.”

Does the Secretary of State agree that these storms are yet another wake-up call about the need for a proper national resilience plan that covers our power lines, flood defences and critical infrastructure?

The truth is that, as a country, we face significant threats from extreme weather in the years ahead. Today we should acknowledge the important work done in response to this crisis, but the lesson has been demonstrated yet again that we owe people the long-term planning and investment to give them all the protection we can.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The right hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members will be surprised that I am in a measure of agreement with him. He is absolutely right to warn that extreme weather events could be—I am not saying they will be—a feature of our landscape and climate. As a constituency MP, I remember the floods of 2013-14 and the devastation they caused.

The right hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I launched a review of Storm Arwen, and we have learned many lessons from the interim report. We are committed to conversing with colleagues across Government on a more integrated plan. I am grateful to him for highlighting the extreme weather conditions that many of us may well face in the future.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. Thousands of my constituents and others across East Sussex remain not only without electricity but without water. I recognise this is one of the worst storms in decades, and I also recognise the huge amount of work delivered on the ground by the engineers at UK Power Networks and South East Water to try to fix this, but our water supply requires the electricity system to work and it is not good enough that there are no back-up generators in place for the water to be pumped into the hills and other areas across my constituency. May I meet the Secretary of State to discuss how we can have better resilience, with the water companies having their own back-up generators so that people are not without water when the electricity goes down?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend makes a fair point, and he is right to point out the intolerable difficulties that people face with regard to the water supply. Colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and officials in BEIS are very engaged with this, and I would be happy to speak to him at a convenient time.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Following Storms Arwen and Barra in November and December, and Storms Malik and Corrie in late January, we have now had three named storms in a week: Dudley, Eunice and Franklin. There will potentially be a fourth named storm in eight days, with Storm Gladys later this week. It seems this winter will not go quietly.

Naming storms sometimes dulls their impact, but the truth is that these storms' heavy rain and snowfall, combined with record-breaking winds, have caused huge damage to buildings, environmental destruction and, sadly, the loss of four lives to uprooted trees, flying debris and flooding. My sympathies are with all those affected.

I join the shadow Secretary of State in thanking all the engineers who restored power to homes across the country and, indeed, the Network Rail engineers who restored the track and kept us moving. I am very sympathetic to his points about compensation payments.

Climate change has seen an increased frequency of storms, with Storm Franklin currently giving rise to flood warnings in parts of Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Will the Secretary of State confirm that he will do all he can to ensure that his Government keep their climate pledges and the large spending commitments that go with them? Will he ignore his Back Benchers who seem to be obsessed with the UK reneging on its agreements? Following COP26, what are we doing to discuss future international responses to worldwide extreme weather?

Finally, Eunice left about 1.4 million homes without power, and Storm Arwen affected more than 1 million homes, including thousands in Aberdeenshire that were without power for well over a week. What short-term and long-term plans are being considered by the UK Government to strengthen our energy resilience and infrastructure? Crucially, what is being done to ensure we do not see a repeat of last year, when thousands were without power for so long?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman raises a number of fair points. On the net zero challenge, he will be pleased to know that the Chancellor's latest comprehensive spending review at the end of last year had a considerable uplift in the capital spend dedicated to net zero. He will also appreciate that, for the first time ever, we had a ringfence for tidal stream. The Government are doing lots of things to pursue renewables and to decarbonise our power system.

On resilience, the hon. Gentleman will know that I commissioned a review of Storm Arwen, and there is an interim report. I am sure he and I will be able to discuss the full report in due course.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): Storms Eunice and Franklin continue to have devastating impacts across Keighley and Ilkley, with several homes still flooded and a landslide at the rear of a property on Westlea Avenue in Riddlesden which has forced several constituents out of their homes, with one property left at structural risk. My heart goes out to all those impacted. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that emergency support will be made available to all those affected, and particularly to those who face the critical situation of being forced out of their homes for their own safety?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As I suggested in the statement, my hon. Friend will be pleased to know that we are working very closely with the distribution network operators to ensure adequate physical support. There is also a compensation scheme, which is operated with Ofgem. I personally raised the amount that people could be compensated in the aftermath of Storm Arwen, and we will stick to that this time. There is plenty of support for his constituents.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Last week, we had a red alert for much of south Wales. The Minister has said that there have been a number of discussions with electricity companies, including Western Power Distribution, but can he tell the House what discussion has taken place with the Welsh Government?

Kwasi Kwarteng: We speak to officials in the devolved Administrations on a regular basis. I spoke only to WPD and the distribution network companies, but our officials engage with DA colleagues all the time.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): Following this week's storms, yet again my constituents have been hit by flooding in their homes, and Staffordshire businesses have been disrupted. Will my right hon. Friend work with me to create a flood control centre, based in Stafford, which will provide 24-hour local assistance to my constituents who are affected by flooding?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I reassure my hon. Friend that as a consequence of the 2013-14 floods, we established and made much more robust local resilience forums and flood defence networks. I would be happy to discuss with her schemes that may be applied to her constituency, particularly as regards a centre in Stafford.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Flood warnings are in place across South Yorkshire and this is a worrying time for many in Barnsley, especially those without adequate insurance. I acknowledge the work of Flood Re, but, sadly, for many this is still not affordable. What work are the Government doing with insurance companies to make sure that everyone can get the insurance they deserve?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Again, I refer to the 2013-14 period. I know that a number of people here were not in the House at that time, but this was precisely the issue that came up then and we have tried to engage with Flood Re. It has responded more effectively and we will see what more can be done in this area.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Shropshire has seen three storms in one week, with massive flooding along the River Severn, displaced flooding and a huge amount of storm damage. Often in these circumstances the actions or inactions of insurance companies, in supporting businesses that have been struggling after the pandemic and are now being flooded and people who are being driven out of their homes, compound the trauma that so many people suffer. Will the Secretary of State ensure that his Department deals with the Association of British Insurers and others to ensure speedy payouts? *[Interruption.]*

Kwasi Kwarteng: As the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), reminds me, the Government and her Department are looking at Flood Re and how it responds to these very affecting natural disasters. However, I would be happy to discuss with my right hon. Friend the specific issues of business resilience and support that arise in his constituency.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The aftermath of Storm Eunice and Storm Franklin has taught us what many in Shropshire and across the rest of the country already knew: whenever a storm hits, the Government do not seem to be prepared to support the thousands of people in rural areas who are really badly affected. This is the third year in a row that villages along the Severn and Vyrnwy rivers have faced record or near-record levels of flooding—this includes the records being breached just a few hours ago in my constituency. People have been left cut off, often without power, water and, in some cases, accommodation. In order to help those impacted by these winter storms, these communities also need the food, water, emergency accommodation and electricity generators that have been mentioned while those services are restored. So will the Government commit to providing that assistance to people in the aftermath of these storms and to working with the Environment Agency to deal with the catchment areas in the upper Severn?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Perhaps belatedly, I welcome the hon. Lady to her position; I believe this is the first time I have encountered her in BEIS questions or statements. On the substance of her remarks, we engage readily with colleagues across the House who represent Shropshire seats. We have looked into how we can be more resilient against flooding in the Severn area, and my colleagues in DEFRA are very focused on this issue. I would be happy to engage with her on the business side of this resilience package.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): First, I pay tribute to the work of UK Power Networks, which has been reconnecting people 24/7 over the weekend; they got me at 4 am on Saturday, for which I was very grateful. However, certain areas, such as Knockholt and Swanley Village in my constituency, have been subject to a number of power cuts over the year and have been difficult to reconnect this time because of out-of-date infrastructure. Will we make sure that they are prioritised in the wash-up of this, when we look at how we strengthen our infrastructure overall?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that we have engaged very actively with UKPN; I spoke to the chief executive officer only this morning, and I understand that the Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands), was very near my hon. Friend's constituency, if not in it, earlier this morning. This issue is something we are very focused on; we want to engage with her to build up local resilience and, crucially, to work with the distributors of power.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I join the Secretary of State in thanking local people in Bristol and, in particular, Bristol City Council for getting meals to

[Karin Smyth]

vulnerable people during the difficult last weekend, and Great Western Railway for trying to keep things running between Bristol and London. May I press him a little on the request from one of my colleagues for him to join the flood preparedness taskforce, working with local leaders, and ask what moves he is making to work with local leaders in Bristol and the further south-west to make us better prepared for the future?

Kwasi Kwarteng: On flooding, I know from my own experience as a constituency MP that a huge amount of work is being done at the Environment Agency level and co-ordinated by my right hon. and hon. Friends in DEFRA. They engage closely with flooded areas, and particularly vulnerable areas. The Government are always looking to reinforce our provision and help, and to learn lessons from events such as Storm Arwen. We are learning lessons and have learned lessons, but there is more progress to be made.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): As my right hon. Friend has said, we have seen unprecedented levels of power outages because of the consistent levels of storms in the past few months. He also mentioned the review after Storm Arwen, but will he say what steps the power companies are taking to ensure that all replacement infrastructure—that is happening as we speak—is much more resilient than that which it is replacing, so that we do not see the same issues in future storms?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend raises an important point. It is heartening to see him re-engaging with the House in such a dynamic way. He was a fabulous Whip—firm but gentle—and it is good to see him engaging on this issue. He will know that we engage with the power companies all the time; I have spoken to these people, including the CEOs, and they have given certain commitments. This time, they have responded very quickly. We had issues last time, but they have learnt the lessons from that. I am very happy to talk to him about how we are putting their feet to the fire on their promises and making sure that they can deliver on those. They made certain commitments this week and I am looking forward to seeing them making sure that they deliver on them.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): May I add my condolences about the people who died during these storms? Yesterday, hundreds of people in the north-west were forced to flee their homes as rivers burst their banks, and thousands more households remain without heating or electricity. Although Storms Eunice and Franklin may not be directly linked to global heating, there is absolutely no doubt that the impact of these kinds of extreme weather events will become all the more destructive as the climate crisis intensifies. Yet Tory Back Benchers are still plotting to deal a hammer blow to hard-won progress on climate, lining up the net zero agenda as the latest target in their never-ending culture war. Does the Secretary of State agree that recent days have demonstrated the importance of not only investing more in climate resilience measures, but going further and faster in decarbonising our economy?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman will know that I have nothing but good will to all my colleagues on the Government Benches, and we have a healthy debate

about many matters of public policy. He will also know that we are 100% committed to the net zero strategy, which I was told by someone who is not even a resident of the UK was a world-beating document. I have announced that we have increased our financial commitment to net zero more than any other Government, and we want to work with everyone across the House to fight the challenge of climate change.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): Flash flooding caused chaos and havoc throughout my Colne Valley constituency over the weekend: on Waingate in Linthwaite, fast-flowing water was going through people's homes; Gynn Lane in Honley was like a river; and businesses were flooded in Holmfirth. I really thank the Kirklees Council staff who were updating me on the situation until late last night—Councillor Donna Bellamy and many more were on site and kept me updated. Does the Secretary of State agree that as well as resilience in our electricity network, we need resilience in our drainage infrastructure? We need to clear culverts, gullies and drains of debris so that when we get such heavy rainfall, we do not see flash flooding.

Kwasi Kwarteng: That is a crucial point. The effects of the storm clearly operate right across our economy. It is not just a power-distribution issue; flooding is a huge challenge. As a constituency MP with a Thames-side seat, I remember the flooding in 2013 and 2014. The Environment Agency and the water companies—Thames Water in my case—all have a responsibility to keep infrastructure in as fit and ready a state as possible, so that in future we have more resilience against such storms.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Right now, York is flooding. We are particularly concerned about the Clementhorpe area and the area around Tower Street, where there are lots of businesses that are not able to benefit from the Flood Re scheme. Will the Secretary of State go back and look at insurance for businesses so that they do not perpetually lose out year after year?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), assures me that she and her team and colleagues in DEFRA are willing and eager to engage with the hon. Lady. My understanding is that the Foss barrier is working and has not been breached yet. I am hopeful that my DEFRA colleagues can engage with the hon. Lady on this extremely important issue.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): Jack Bristow from Sutton Courtenay in my constituency is one of the four people who lost their lives in Storm Eunice. He had been using his truck to help with the aftermath of the storm down in Hampshire when a tree fell on it. He was only 23 years old and had a one-year-old son. Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to Jack and in paying our condolences to his mother Teresa, to his partner Courtney and to all those who knew and loved him?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am very saddened to hear about the fate of my hon. Friend's all too young constituent. These tragic events remind us of the real human cost of climate change and extreme weather eventualities. I

remember that in my own constituency eight years ago, in 2014, a little eight-year-old boy, Zane Gbangbola, died. This is really the first time I have been able to pay tribute to him. I fully understand the pain and anguish that Jack's family are having to live with.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his diligence. Tens of thousands of people across Northern Ireland have lost electricity, including some 500 people in one village in my Strangford constituency. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether additional funding will filter through the Barnett consequential to coastal constituencies in particular? My Strangford constituency's battle with coastal erosion has seen increased issues with coastal roads. What discussions has he had with the Deputy Minister at the Northern Ireland Assembly to ensure that all parts of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland will have help when they need it and that emergency support will be on hand as soon as possible?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman will know that Northern Ireland gets its fair share of support through the Barnett formula. On the specifics of climate change and erosion, I would be happy to meet him with DEFRA colleagues. I visited Northern Ireland only two months ago to talk about the need for more resilient energy and to decarbonise and rely more on renewables. Northern Ireland has a great story to tell about our future battle against climate change and I am happy to talk to the hon. Gentleman about it.

Business of the House

6.24 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mark Spencer): Madam Deputy Speaker, I should like to make a short business statement.

Tomorrow's business will now be remaining stages of the Charities Bill [*Lords*], followed by remaining stages of the Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill [*Lords*], followed by a motion to approve the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) Regulations 2022 (SI, 2022, No. 123).

The business for the rest of the week remains unchanged from that previously announced, and I shall make a further business statement in the usual way on Thursday.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for advance notice of and a copy of the business statement.

First, I wish to make it absolutely crystal clear that Her Majesty's loyal Opposition of course support the Government on standing up to threats of Russian aggression. It is vital that we do so across the House in a united way, as the Secretary of State for Defence said earlier, because we must not and will not allow Putin to divide us. I put on the record my thanks to the Secretary of State for Defence for how he has worked with colleagues in Labour's Defence and Foreign Affairs teams.

Labour's commitment to NATO is unshakeable and part of our DNA. We are acutely aware of both the threat to Ukraine and the potential impact of any Russian aggression against Ukraine on our European NATO allies on the border. Britain is right to have stepped up military, practical, economic and diplomatic support, and we support the imposition of sanctions against Russia.

We must now also strengthen defences at home against the influence of Russian money. Labour has long called for action to tackle this influence. We hope that the Government will urgently take action following the imposition of sanctions. For instance, we have called for the reform of Companies House, for the registration of overseas entities and for the implementation of the recommendations of the Russia report. I heard the Secretary of State for Defence say earlier that the Government are considering some of those things and that an announcement would be made shortly. I understand that the Leader of the House may not be able to give me an instant answer, but will he please go back to his colleagues and find out for us when that will be? If not, will he commit to make time for a debate on the subject?

We look forward to the debate tomorrow and hope that it will be followed quickly by one on the need to take action on corrupt Russian money.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her support. It is vital that the House stands united at this time against an aggressive Russian state. She has had ample opportunity to ask questions today, not only in Defence questions but following the statement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence, but there will also be adequate time tomorrow to debate the statutory

[Mark Spencer]

instrument and get all those matters on the record. I encourage all colleagues from across the House to come and engage in that debate.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): What she said.

Mark Spencer: What I said.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): If there is an invasion this week, what opportunities may there be to have further conversations about the issue and about what steps are being taken on the defence side to provide deterrent assets for the Ukrainian side?

Mark Spencer: I hope the hon. Gentleman took the opportunity to question the Secretary of State for Defence an hour ago. There will be another opportunity tomorrow to get those matters on the record and to question the Secretary of State at the Dispatch Box.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): A Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine will lead to a refugee crisis in eastern Europe. Will the Leader of the House ensure that sufficient time to debate the humanitarian response of the UK Government and partners to such an eventuality?

Mark Spencer: I will make another business statement on Thursday, when the hon. Member will have an opportunity to ask for such a debate. He will be aware of the avenues open to him to secure a debate of that nature.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Last week I met Lesia Vasylenko and Alona Shkrum, two Ukrainian MPs, who urged me to press the Government to impose economic and financial sanctions, particularly on proxies of the Russian regime. Will urgent action be included in the Government's response to the debate tomorrow?

Mark Spencer: It will. That is the purpose of the SI: the sanctions are being provided for so that the UK Government can take strong action against an aggressive

Russian state. Should Russia take unilateral action and go into Ukraine, the sanctions will be available to us and will be very robust.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): We Liberal Democrats support the Government's introduction of this sanctions legislation, but believe that they should go even further and root out dirty money now. The Registration of Overseas Entities Bill will do just that, and it is ready to go. Does the Leader of the House agree that we do not need to wait until the next parliamentary Session, because we can get on with that now?

Mark Spencer: This statutory instrument widens the scope of the individuals against whom we can take action. I thank the hon. Lady for her support. It is vital that the House be united on this matter, and I hope that the Liberal Democrats will be in the Chamber tomorrow to engage in the debate and to make those points.

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

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): What a surprise! I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Government for bringing forward this statutory instrument tomorrow, and assure them that my party fully supports their intentions regarding sanctions. Will tomorrow's debate also cover the sanctions that will be carried out by other European countries, NATO and the USA?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I do not think that it is quite in order for the hon. Gentleman to ask now what will be in the debate tomorrow. This statement is only about the fact that the debate is tomorrow, but I am sure that the Leader of the House will give part of an answer to him.

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is a long-time campaigner for people all over the world who face oppression. He will have an opportunity tomorrow to engage in the debate, and I know that he will be present.

Points of Order

6.31 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether I might seek your guidance and advice. In recent days, there has been widespread coverage of the settlement of an extremely high-profile court case. There are undoubtedly significant sensitivities and difficulties here, so I am conscious of the need to proceed with care. My concern is whether such a significant settlement could be satisfied by the use of public funds. I seek your guidance on how I might elicit clarification and assurance from a Government Minister that no public funds have been used, or will be used, in satisfaction of part or all of the settlement.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He is absolutely right that it is a sensitive matter. He has been quite ingenious in raising it in this way, and we must proceed with sensitivity. If he were to table questions for ministerial answer in the Chamber, there could be difficulties, because questions are based on ministerial responsibility, and there is no obvious ministerial responsibility for the expenditure of public funds in the way that he suggests. It might therefore be best if he were to write to Ministers for the assurance that he seeks. I hope that that helps him.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your advice on raising the matter of the removal of a title when it impacts on a geographical location, such as my city of York.

The understandable restrictions set out in paragraph 22.15 of “Erskine May” prohibit the discussion of matters appertaining to the sovereign or the royal family, except for those concerning costs to public funds of royal events or palaces. This matter does not concern those. The reason why this is relevant to Parliament is that the removal of a title, such as that of duke, can be achieved only by passing legislation. According to the Clerks of the House, this was achieved in 1798 in respect of a certain individual through legislation, and in 1917, under the Titles Deprivation Act, in relation to treason.

The sovereign does not have powers to remove a title unless Parliament confers such powers on them. Nor does Parliament have those powers, except under specific legislation that is very limited in its application. In order to make such powers available, new legislation would need to be introduced, which appears to be impossible under the rulings of “Erskine May”. This is a matter that 88% of my constituents have asked me to pursue, and I therefore seek your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how the removal of a dukedom can be achieved.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. She is correct that questions cannot reflect on the sovereign or members of the royal family, but she rightly said, there are other means by which the matters she has raised can be brought before the House. She rightly says that the issue that she described can be resolved by legislation, and she knows that there are ways in which she can introduce legislation to the House—by a private Member’s Bill and under the ten-minute rule procedure. I am quite sure that if she were to ask the advice of the Clerks, they would guide her on how she might take this matter forward.

Skills and Post-16 Education Bill [Lords]*Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee***New Clause 12****OFFICE FOR STUDENTS: PUBLICATION AND PROTECTION
FROM DEFAMATION**

In the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, after section 67 insert—

*“Publication***67A Power for the OfS to publish notices, decisions and reports**

(1) The OfS may publish notices, decisions and reports given or made in the performance of its functions.

(2) Subsection (1) does not affect any other power of the OfS to publish such a matter.

(3) Publication under this section does not breach—

- (a) an obligation of confidence owed by the OfS, or
- (b) any other restriction on the publication or disclosure of information (however imposed).

(4) But nothing in this section authorises the OfS to publish information where doing so contravenes the data protection legislation.

For this purpose “the data protection legislation” has the same meaning as in the Data Protection Act 2018 (see section 3 of that Act).

(5) In deciding whether to publish a notice, decision or report under subsection (1), the OfS must, in particular, consider—

- (a) the interests of—
 - (i) students on higher education courses provided by English higher education providers,
 - (ii) people thinking about undertaking, or who have undertaken, such courses, and
 - (iii) English higher education providers,
- (b) the need for excluding from publication, so far as practicable, any information which relates to the affairs of a particular body or individual, where publication of that information would or might, in the opinion of the OfS, seriously and prejudicially affect the interests of that body or individual, and
- (c) the public interest.

(6) For the purposes of this section and sections 67B and 67C—

- (a) a reference to a decision includes a reference to the reasons for it, and
- (b) any decision made in the course of exercising, or for the purposes of enabling the OfS to exercise, any of the OfS’s functions (including making any other decision) is made “in the performance of its functions”.

67B Publication of decision to conduct or terminate investigation

“(1) This section applies where under section 67A(1) the OfS publishes a decision to conduct an investigation.

(2) If the publication identifies a higher education provider or other body or individual whose activities are being, or to be, investigated, and—

- (a) the OfS terminates the investigation without making any finding, or
- (b) the findings of the investigation, so far as they relate to the higher education provider, body or individual, do not result in the OfS taking any further action,

the OfS must publish a notice stating that fact.

(3) Section 67C does not apply to the publication of the decision to conduct the investigation to the extent that it includes information other than—

- (a) a statement of the OfS’s decision to conduct the investigation,
- (b) a summary of the matter being, or to be, investigated, and
- (c) a reference to the identity of any higher education provider or other body or individual whose activities are being, or to be, investigated.

(4) See section 67A(6) for the meaning of references to decisions.

*Defamation***67C Protection from defamation claims**

(1) For the purposes of the law of defamation, publication by the OfS of any notice, decision or report given or made in the performance of its functions is privileged unless the publication is shown to have been made with malice.

This is subject to section 67B.

(2) See section 67A(6) for the meaning of references to decisions.”—(*Alex Burghart.*)

This new clause amends the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 so as to confer publication powers on the Office for Students and provide it with protection from defamation claims,

Brought up, and read the First time.

6.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Alex Burghart): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

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

New clause 1—Apprenticeships for prisoners—

“Notwithstanding any other statutory provision, prisoners in English prisons may participate in approved English apprenticeships, as defined by section A1 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.”

The aim of this new clause is to ensure that prisoners can start Apprenticeships while they are serving their sentence.

New clause 2—Provision of opportunities for education and skills development—

“(1) Any person of any age has the right to free education on an approved course up to Level 3 supplied by an approved provider of further or technical education, if he or she has not already studied at that level.

(2) Any approved provider must receive automatic in-year funding for any student covered by subsection (1), and supported by the Adult Education Budget, at a tariff rate set by the Secretary of State.

(3) Any employer receiving apprenticeship funding must spend at least two thirds of that funding on people who begin apprenticeships at Levels 2 and 3 before the age of 25.”

This new clause would provide for education and skills development up to a Level 3 qualification for any person of any age supplied by an approved provider if they have not already studied at that level.

New clause 3—Amendments to section 42B of the Education Act 1997—

“(1) Section 42B of the Education Act 1997 is amended as follows.

(2) After subsection (1) insert—

“(1A) In complying with subsection (1), the proprietor must give a representative range of education and training providers (including, where reasonably practicable, a university technical college) access to registered pupils on at least three occasions during each of the first, second and third key phase of their education.”

(3) After subsection (2) insert—

“(2A) The proprietor of a school in England within subsection (2) must—

- (a) ensure that each registered pupil meets, during both the first and second key phase of their education, with a representative range of education and training providers to whom access is given, and
- (b) ask providers to whom access is given to provide information that includes the following—
 - (i) information about the provider and the approved technical education qualifications or apprenticeships that the provider offers,
 - (ii) information about the careers to which those technical education qualifications or apprenticeships might lead,
 - (iii) a description of what learning or training with the provider is like, and
 - (iv) responses to questions from the pupils about the provider or technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

(2B) Access given under subsection (1) must be for a reasonable period of time during the standard school day.”

(4) After subsection (5)(a), insert—

“(aa) a requirement to provide access to a representative range of education and training providers to include where practicable a university technical college;”

(5) In subsection (5)(c), after “access” insert “and the times at which the access is to be given;”

(6) After subsection (5)(c), insert—

“(d) an explanation of how the proprietor proposes to comply with the obligations imposed under subsection (2A).”

(7) After subsection (9), insert—

“(9A) For the purposes of this section—

- (a) the first key phase of a pupil’s education is the period—
 - (i) beginning at the same time as the school year in which the majority of pupils in the pupil’s class attain the age of 13, and
 - (ii) ending with 28 February in the following school year;
- (b) the second key phase of a pupil’s education is the period—
 - (i) beginning at the same time as the school year in which the majority of pupils in the pupil’s class attain the age of 15, and
 - (ii) ending with 28 February in the following school year;
- (c) the third key phase of a pupil’s education is the period—
 - (i) beginning at the same time as the school year in which the majority of pupils in the pupil’s class attain the age of 17, and
 - (ii) ending with 28 February in the following school year.”

This new clause is intended to replace Clause 14. This clause will ensure that section 2 of the Technical and Further Education Act 2017, commonly known as the Baker Clause, is legally enforceable.

New clause 4—Green Skills Strategy—

“The Secretary of State must, before the end of the period of 12 months beginning with the day on which this Act is passed, publish a Green Skills Strategy, setting out a plan to support people to attain the skills, capabilities or expertise through higher education, further education or technical education that directly contribute to, or indirectly support, the following—

- (a) compliance with the duty imposed by section 1 of the Climate Change Act 2008 (United Kingdom net zero emissions target),
- (b) adaptation to climate change, or
- (c) meeting other environmental goals (such as restoration or enhancement of the natural environment).”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to publish a national green skills strategy which would set out a plan to support people to attain skills which will directly contribute to or indirectly support climate change and environmental goals.

New clause 5—Universal Credit conditionality review—

“The Secretary of State must review universal credit conditionality with a view to ensuring that adult learners who are—

- (a) unemployed, and
- (b) in receipt of universal credit

remain entitled to universal credit if they enrol on an approved course for a qualification which is deemed to support them to secure sustainable employment.”

This new clause is intended to ensure greater flexibility for potential students in receipt of universal credit to take up appropriate training that will better equip them for employment.

New clause 6—Skills levels in England and Wales: review—

“(1) Within one year of the passing of this Act, and each year thereafter, the Secretary of State must prepare and publish a report on overall levels of skills in England and Wales and their economic impact, including regional and demographic breakdowns.

(2) The report under subsection (1) must in particular examine—

- (a) cohort sizes and compositions of all qualifications from entry level to level 8,
- (b) cohort skill achievement rates, in terms of result breakdowns,
- (c) cohort placement success rates, in terms of numbers in further qualifications or new employment within 12 months after achieving each qualification,
- (d) job retention and labour market turnover,
- (e) labour productivity, and
- (f) job satisfaction and fulfilment.

(3) The report under subsection (1) must be laid before both Houses of Parliament.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to publish an annual report on overall skills levels and economic output across England and Wales.

New clause 7—Lifetime skills guarantee—

“(1) All persons have the right to study a fully-funded approved course for a qualification up to level 3 supplied by an approved provider of further, higher, or technical education if they—

- (a) do not currently hold a level 3 qualification, or
- (b) currently hold a level 3 qualification and would benefit from re-training.

(2) The Secretary of State must prepare and publish a list of approved courses for the purposes of subsection (1).

(3) The Secretary of State must consult on the list of approved courses to ensure that they are compatible with national levelling up and skills strategies.

(4) The Secretary of State must review the list of approved courses at least every six months with a view to ensuring that they reflect the skills needed as the economy changes.”

This new clause places the Government lifetime skills guarantee on a statutory footing, ensuring that those without an A-level or equivalent qualification, or who hold such qualification but would benefit from reskilling, are able to study a fully funded approved course.

New clause 8—National Strategy for Integrated Education

“(1) The Secretary of State must, before the end of the period of 12 months beginning with the day on which this Act is passed, publish a National Strategy for Integrated Education.

(2) A strategy under this section must—

- (a) support the creation or development of courses offering integrated academic and vocational content, or a range of academic and vocational modules which can be combined into hybrid qualifications, at levels 4 to 8;
- (b) support the creation or development of institutions offering courses under paragraph (a);
- (c) set out a role for training programme providers in designing courses under paragraph (a).

(3) The Secretary of State must consult the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, Ofqual, and Quality Assurance Agency on any strategy to be published under this section.

(4) The Secretary of State must make regulations within 24 months of the passing of this Act to provide for such elements of the strategy as require enactment through statutory provisions.”

New clause 9—Integrated compatibility of modules and accreditation—

“(1) The Secretary of State must publish a National Accreditation Framework for Modular Learning. A framework must include guidance on—

- (a) the unbundling of modular components of courses and qualifications;
- (b) the stacking of modular components of courses and qualifications; and
- (c) the transfer of modular components between institutions,

for the purposes of ensuring—

- (a) (i) transparency;
- (ii) mutual recognition of qualifications across academic, vocational and integrated further and higher education institutions; and
- (iii) clarity on the options available to learners for unbundling or stacking modules into an overall qualification which meets the needs of their own professional development, and skills gaps within the national labour-market.

(2) The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, Ofqual, and Quality Assurance Agency must assist in the preparation of any framework under this section.

(3) A framework under this section must set out a role for the Institute, Ofqual and the Quality Assurance Agency in ensuring the effective operation of the framework.”

New clause 10—Role of employers in employee reskilling—

“(1) The Secretary of State may make regulations for the purpose of ensuring that employers provide—

- (a) a minimum number of hours per year for in-work training and skills development for employees; and
- (b) a minimum number of hours of retraining support for courses chosen at the discretion of former employees who have been made redundant, as part of an employer’s redundancy package.

(2) The minimum numbers of hours under section (1)(a) and (b) are to be set by the Secretary of State.

(3) In this section, “employer” has the same meaning as in section 4.

(4) The Secretary of State may, by regulation, establish a skills tax credit, for the purpose of—

- (a) making allowance for funding the provision of time and training under subsection (1); and
- (b) incentivising and rewarding employers for investing the skills development of their employees.”

New clause 11—Transition to 16+ education—

“(1) The Secretary of State may make regulations requiring local authorities to fulfil the function of an admissions authority with regard to admissions to further education courses provided within their administrative jurisdiction, for the purposes of

ensuring admission to further education is allocated in an open and fair manner.

(2) Regulations under this section may require local authorities to run admissions processes in relation to further education in a manner comparable with the processes set out in Part III of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 in so far as they relate to the admissions processes for primary and secondary education.

(3) In this section, “further education” has the same meaning as in the Education Act 1996 (see section 2 of that Act).”

This new clause would allow the Secretary of State to require local authorities to run admission to further education in a manner comparable to admissions for primary and secondary education.

New clause 13—Access to Sharia-compliant lifelong learning loans—

“(1) The Secretary of State must make provision by regulations for Sharia-compliant student finance to be made available as part of the lifelong learning entitlement.

(2) Regulations under this section are to be made by statutory instrument, and a statutory instrument containing regulations under this section may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, each House of Parliament.”

This new clause allows the Secretary of State to make provision for Sharia-compliant LLE loans.

New clause 14—Recognition of skills in the energy sector—

“(1) Within six months of the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must publish an Energy Sector Skills Strategy, for the purposes of—

- (a) achieving cross-sector recognition of core skills and training in the offshore energy sector, including the oil and gas sector, and the renewable energy sector; and
- (b) ensuring training and training standards bodies within the offshore energy sector adopt a transferable skills and competency-based approach to training.

(2) The strategy must target all workers, whether directly or indirectly (sub-contracted or agency) employed, or engaged through day-rate or self-employed contract models.

(3) When producing the strategy, the Secretary of State must consult with—

- (a) workers within the offshore energy sector;
- (b) unions within the offshore energy sector;
- (c) energy companies; and
- (d) training standards bodies relevant to the offshore energy sector.

(4) The Secretary of State must implement the strategy within 12 months of the passing of this Act. The Secretary of State may make regulations to provide for such elements of the strategy as require enactment through statutory provision.”

This new clause would facilitate cross-sector recognition of skills and training between the oil and gas sector and the renewable energy sector.

New clause 15—Retraining guarantee for oil and gas workers—

“(1) The Secretary of State must guarantee access to training, grants, resources and other support facilities to workers in the oil and gas sector, including—

- (a) assessment of existing skills and training;
- (b) understanding of skills matrices for careers in the offshore energy sector, including renewable energy and oil and gas;
- (c) advice on alternative green energy jobs; and
- (d) funding to complete training relevant to the green energy sector;

for the purpose of proactively supporting oil and gas workers wishing to transition to careers in the green energy sector, regardless of their current contract status.

(2) Support under this section must be made available to—

- (a) all workers, whether directly or indirectly (sub-contracted or agency) employed, or engaged through day-rate or self-employed contract models; and
- (b) workers who have recently left the oil and gas sector.”

This new clause would establish a retraining guarantee for oil and gas workers seeking to leave the sector, supporting them in transitioning to green energy jobs.

New clause 16—National review and plan for improving levels of adult literacy—

“(1) Within two years of the passing of this Act, and every two years thereafter, the Secretary of State must review adult literacy levels in England, for the purpose of improving adult literacy levels.

(2) A review under this section must identify the number of adults with literacy levels—

- (a) below Entry Level 1,
- (b) below Entry Level 2,
- (c) below Entry Level 3,
- (d) below Level 1, and
- (e) below Level 2.

(3) The findings of a review under this section must be published in a report, which must be laid before Parliament.

(4) A report under this section must include a breakdown of the levels of adult literacy by local authority area.

(5) When a report under this section is laid before Parliament, the Secretary of State must also publish a strategy setting out steps the Government intends to take to improve levels of adult literacy in England.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to, every two years, review levels of adult literacy in England, publish the findings of that review and set out a strategy to improve levels of adult literacy in England.

New clause 17—Availability of humanities, social sciences, arts and languages courses—

“(1) The Secretary of State must review the availability of humanities, social sciences, arts and languages courses at Entry Level through to Level 4 in a specified area to which a local skills improvement plan relates.

(2) The outcome of a review under this section must be—

- (a) provided to the relevant employer representative body for a specified area; and
- (b) laid before both Houses of Parliament.

(3) Where a review under this section identifies inadequate availability of courses in a specified area, the Secretary of State must take steps to remedy this inadequacy, to ensure courses are available in all specified areas.

(4) A review under this section in relation to a specified area must be conducted each time the Secretary of State approves and publishes a local skills improvement plan for that specified area.”

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to review the availability of humanities, social sciences, arts and languages courses at Entry level to Level 4 in areas to which an LSIP applies. It would also require the Secretary of State to take steps to remedy inadequate availability of the courses.

Amendment 2, page 2, line 36, after “authority” insert
“and further education providers in the specified area”.

This amendment would provide for employer representative boards to develop local skills improvement plans in partnership with local further education providers.

Amendment 18, page 3, line 6, at end insert—

- “(ba) draws on responses to a public consultation conducted by the relevant local authority for the specified area on the education and training that should be made available in the relevant area, and”

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to draw on responses to a public consultation run by the relevant local authority, when publishing a local skills improvement plan for a given area.

Amendment 16, page 3, line 10, at end insert—

- “(d) lists specific strategies to support learners who have or have previously had, a statement of Special Educational Need or an Education and Health Care Plan into employment, including but not limited to provision for supported internships.”

This amendment would require local skills improvement plans to list specific strategies to support learners who have or have previously had, a statement of Special Educational Need or an Education and Health Care Plan into employment, including but not limited to provision for supported internships.

Amendment 14, in clause 2, page 3, line 15, after “England” insert

“with the consent of the relevant local authority, Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and, where relevant, Mayoral Combined Authority”.

This amendment provides for local authorities to give consent in the designation of employer representative bodies, to ensure employer representative bodies are representative of the areas they cover.

Amendment 4, page 3, line 20, after “employers”, insert

“and any relevant community, education, arts, faith and third sector organisations”.

Amendment 5, page 3, line 41, at end insert—

“(6) The functions of the Secretary of State under this section may also be exercised by a relevant mayoral combined authority in England, where the designation relates to an area within their administrative jurisdiction, provided that education and skills are within the relevant authority’s devolved competence.”

Amendment 17, page 3, line 41, at end insert—

“(6) Representative bodies which are employers, and employer organisations which are members of employer representative bodies, must sign up to the Disability Confident employer scheme within six months of being designated, or becoming a member of, the employer representative body.”

Amendment 6, in clause 3, page 4, line 18, at end insert—

“(5) The functions of the Secretary of State under this section may also be exercised by a relevant mayoral combined authority in England, where the designation relates to an area within their administrative jurisdiction, provided that education and skills are within the relevant authority’s devolved competence.”

Amendment 12, in clause 6, page 7, line 23, at end insert—

“(2A) The Institute shall perform a review of the operation of the apprenticeship levy, paying particular regard to considering whether sufficient apprenticeships at level 3 and below are available.”

This amendment would require the Institute to perform a review of the operation of the apprenticeship levy, and would require the Institute to pay particular regard to ensuring that sufficient apprenticeships at level 3 and below are available.

Amendment 15, in clause 7, page 10, line 37, at end insert—

“(2A) Subsection (2) does not apply to the withdrawal of level three courses for the period of four years beginning with the day on which this Act is passed.”

This amendment seeks to reintroduce the Lord’s amendment (amendment 29), preventing IfATE from withdrawing approval of established level 3 courses including BTECs for four years.

Amendment 1, page 17, line 28, leave out clause 14.

This amendment is consequential on NC3.

Amendment 8, in clause 14, page 17, line 28, at end insert—

“(A1) Section 42A of the Education Act 1997 (Provision of careers guidance in schools in England) is amended as follows—

“(d) is provided by a person who is registered with the Career Development Institute, and who holds a level 4 qualification.”

Amendment 13, page 18, line 5, at end insert—

“(aa) ensure that each registered pupil receives two weeks’ worth of compulsory work experience,

(ab) ensure that each registered pupil receives face to face careers guidance, and”.

This amendment would require every school to provide face to face careers guidance for every pupil and two weeks’ worth of compulsory work experience for every registered pupil.

Amendment 7, page 19, line 1, at end insert—

“(9B) Local Authorities shall have oversight of the provisions in subsection (2A) and subsection (5), for the purposes of ensuring the provision of careers advice is consistent and high quality.”

Amendment 3, in clause 15, page 20, line 29, at end insert—

“(3) After section 22(2)(c) of the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998 insert—

“(ca) for the establishment of a system of means-tested financial grants, for the purpose of ensuring that financial hardship is not a dissuading factor in the take-up of higher education or further education modules or courses.”

Amendment 11, in clause 34, page 40, line 20, at end insert—

“(e) Sections [Recognition of skills in the energy sector] and [Retraining guarantee for oil and gas workers].”

This amendment is consequential on NC14 and NC15.

Government amendments 9 and 10.

Alex Burghart: It is a pleasure to open the debate on Report of the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill. We had a very good debate in Committee, and I look forward to contributions from Members from across the House today.

I rise to speak to new clause 12 and amendments 9 and 10 in the name of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. The Government announced their intention to table new clause 12 in Committee last November. It inserts three new sections into the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, and will give the Office for Students, the higher education regulator in England, an explicit power to publish information about its compliance and enforcement activity in relation to higher education providers.

It is important that the OfS is able to publish such information in the form of notices, decisions and reports, and it is in the public interest that it should be transparent in its work, particularly when it is investigating providers for potential breaches of the registration conditions placed on them by the regulator. Publication by the OfS regarding its compliance and enforcement functions will demonstrate that appropriate actions are being taken by the regulator, and that will ensure that the reputation of higher education in England is maintained, and that we bear down on poor provision.

Members can be reassured that this power will be discretionary, as there may be reasons why the OfS may not consider it appropriate to publish certain information. The new clause provides, in proposed new section 67A(5) of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, various

factors that the OfS must take into account when deciding whether to publish, including the public interest, but also whether publication would or might seriously and prejudicially affect the interests of a body or individual. The OfS should be transparent about such work, showing the sector, students and the public that it is intervening when necessary, and consequently providing confidence in the regulatory system.

New clause 12 also includes provision in proposed new section 67C to protect the OfS from defamation claims when, for example, it announces the opening of an investigation or publishes regulatory decisions. This protection provides qualified privilege, meaning that there is protection unless publication is shown to have been made with malice.

Other regulators, such as the Competition and Markets Authority, Ofsted and the Children’s Commissioner, have similar powers and protections. We are seeking a power and protection in this new clause to ensure that the OfS has what it needs for the purpose of transparency, and note the need to be as consistent as possible across the statute book. We believe there will be little material impact on the sector as a result of this change, as it simply allows more transparency about what the OfS is already doing.

Publication of notices, decisions and reports will become increasingly important as the OfS scales up its work on driving up quality in higher education and on protecting freedom of speech and academic freedom under the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill.

Amendment 9 brings new clause 12 into force two months after Royal Assent, and amendment 10 amends the long title to cover new clause 12. I hope the House will support these amendments.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I rise to speak to amendments 12 to 16. I start by saying how much I welcome the interest among right hon. and hon. Members in improving this Bill. It is disappointing that the Bill was scheduled for debate on the first day back from recess, when the Government could have predicted that there would be a considerable number of other important statements, and so the House has less than two and a half hours to debate the 35 amendments before us. The further education sector has often been described as a Cinderella service and has often felt that its crucial role as the economic heartbeat of this country is undermined; there is nothing in the scheduling of this Bill or today’s debate to contradict that view.

Notwithstanding that, it is always a great pleasure to debate further education policy. Our country’s Government have presided over a productivity crisis, created a cost of living crisis because they are a high-tax, low-growth Government, and serially under-funded and undermined the institutions that are key to addressing those failings. Yet there is widespread recognition of the need for change, so there was considerable anticipation when the Government announced they were bringing forward a skills Bill to address a generation of failure.

We all remember that the White Paper that preceded the Bill was described as a “once-in-a-generation reform”, but Ministers seem determined to resist any substantive changes to the skills Bill. I wish those Conservative Members who have proposed amendments to the Bill

well, but I am not hopeful that the Government are of a mind to allow their Bill to be improved.

We have a skills Bill here that is silent on apprenticeship reform. Our disappointment about the omission of apprenticeships from the Bill is compounded by the absence of any recognition that the apprenticeship levy has, according to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, “failed by every measure”.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. With great respect to the Government, the issue for me is the lack of detail when it comes to apprenticeships. Does he feel, as I do, that apprenticeships can play an important part in tackling the deficit by giving people a learning structure and valuable work experience that provides both the qualifications and the holistic skills needed for economic growth? If we want to do something to build economic growth, we need apprenticeships.

Mr Perkins: I could not agree more. I am glad to see the hon. Gentleman has overcome any shyness he may have had about speaking in this House and has decided to contribute to this debate, as he seems to contribute to them all, but he makes an important point. Apprenticeships are the gold standard as far as the Labour party is concerned. We believe they should be the heart of the Government’s approach, and it is hugely disappointing that apprenticeship numbers are down by a quarter since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy.

The apprenticeship levy has reduced the number of small businesses that have felt able to contribute to taking on apprentices; it has reduced the number of level 2 and level 3 apprenticeships and it is a significant failure in that regard. Indeed, our amendment 12, which asks for the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education to

“perform a review of the operation of the apprenticeship levy, paying particular regard to considering whether sufficient apprenticeships at level 3 and below”,

is the only opportunity to discuss the future of apprenticeships in this debate.

The funding of level 3 qualifications—an issue of contention since the Government tried to denigrate BTECs, to a widespread and welcome backlash—remains out of the scope of the Bill. Our amendment 15 seeks to reintroduce the four-year moratorium added in another place, to prevent hasty decisions from being made that could widen skills shortages and remove the opportunity to take BTECs. In Committee, the Government even rejected adding the one-year moratorium, which would extend funding of BTECs until 2024, to the Bill. I understand that the Secretary of State has confirmed that BTECs will continue to be funded until 2024, which is welcome, but it is disappointing that the Government were not willing to allow that to be added to the Bill.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the pain around BTECs is because they are usually the gateway for students on lower incomes, students from minority backgrounds and students with disabilities to get into further education? Taking that away is the very opposite of levelling up.

6.45 pm

Mr Perkins: I absolutely agree with all of that. BTECs are also a qualification that is understood and respected by employers. They have a long-standing track record; they are respected by learners and understood by institutions. I am not hostile to the idea of improving them, if something can be done to bring in a better qualification. There is real merit in the potential of T-levels, and as a brand they have immediate buy-in, but the Government need to tread carefully. T-levels are changing shape in front of our eyes. They were brought in as a vocational qualification, but the Secretary of State’s current favourite anecdote is about a student from Barnsley who he met, who said he can go to any university he wants.

The T-level qualification started off on a vocational path, but the Government are now saying that it is a route towards universities—[*Interruption.*] It could potentially be both, but I must say that the Secretary of State’s predecessor, when it was discovered that Russell Group universities were not accepting T-levels, was very sanguine about it. He said, “They’re not about universities. They’re all about going towards the world of work.” This qualification is changing shape in front of our eyes, and the Government need to be careful before they get rid of things that work and replace them with their new qualification.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): One concern I have around T-levels, which I have raised with the Government before, is the work placement aspect and the fact that the availability of the T-level is therefore based on the availability of businesses to provide those work placements. My fear for areas such as Hull, which I represent, and others around the country is that if they do not have the placements, they cannot have the T-level. Therefore, that opportunity is denied to many students, unlike the generalisation of a BTEC, which means that wherever people are in the country, they can study for the same qualification.

Mr Perkins: My hon. Friend characteristically raises an important point, and she is entirely right. When I go and speak to FE colleges, there is widespread concern about the availability of the amount of T-level work experience that is required. Particularly in some communities that do not have high numbers of larger employers and for the smaller colleges, we think there will be real difficulty getting the amount of work experience that is currently envisaged. I suspect that if we look at this qualification in two or three years’ time, it will not have the same demands for work experience; that remains to be seen. However, I share my hon. Friend’s concern.

The amendments proposed by the Opposition and many of the 29 other amendments proposed by hon. Members on both sides of the House seek to make substantive changes to the Bill that could make a real difference and offer a possibility that it will fulfil the proud boasts we have heard from the skills Minister, and his predecessor about the scale of reform proposed.

The other huge disappointment that many of us feel about the Government’s approach to this whole question is their failure to get what further education and vocational education is all about, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) mentioned a moment ago. Further education is magical and transformative.

[Mr Perkins]

For so many people who leave our statutory educational providers disillusioned and uninspired by education, FE has been life-changing. In my family, it was learning in FE that changed my son's life and career opportunities; the same thing happened 20 years before for my sister, and I know it has happened for so many other people in all our constituencies. Yet the Government's approach to this sector has been to inflict eye-watering cuts on it while continually repeating the same lament about employers not being in charge.

As we listen to the latest skills Minister's claims about his reforms, it is worth recalling what went before them. In January 2011 the then skills Minister, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), said that the entire focus of our Government's skills strategy was in

"building a training system that is employer led."

In 2015 the former Chancellor, George Osborne, told us that we now had a system in the hands of an employer-led institute of apprenticeships, and his skills Minister at the time said of the levy:

"At the heart of the apprenticeship drive is the principle that no one better understands the skills employers need than employers themselves."

Two years further on, in 2017, the Government said:

"The Apprenticeship Levy is a cornerstone of the government's skills agenda, creating a system which puts employers at the heart of designing and funding apprenticeships to support productivity and growth."

A year later, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) described local enterprise partnerships as

"business-led partnerships...at the heart of responding to skills needs...that will help individuals and businesses gain the skills they need to grow."

So if the reforms in 2011, 2015, 2017 and 2018 all put employers in the driving seat, and if putting employers in the driving seat is the solution to addressing our productivity and skills crisis, why are the Government now coming back saying that there has been a generation of failure?

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I was a BTEC graduate and I went to Wakefield College. Does my hon. Friend agree that hollowing out further education to the tune of 40%, and the gold standard of apprenticeships, goes against the very essence—the very notion—of levelling up? The Government should ensure that they are a driving force behind that with employers, and they are falling short.

Mr Perkins: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The Government have been at pains to denigrate BTECs. They should be very careful before they do that, particularly before they are absolutely clear that the thing they intend to replace them with has come through its pilot and they fully understand the consequences of the introduction of that policy.

It seems that after 11 years of reforms, all of which we are told have failed because the Government now need to make reforms to put employers in the driving seat, the Government's approach is to abandon devolution and to outsource responsibility for skills policy to local chambers of commerce in the form of local skills

improvement plans. We are used to this Government believing that services can be run better by the private sector than by Government, but they are now even outsourcing policy. We have real concerns about the way that LSIPs are envisaged in their current form. Of course employers, private and public sector, must be sat at the table, but so too should educational establishments, including independent providers and FE colleges, so too should those with local democratic accountability—local authorities and metro Mayors—and the voice of learners must be heard. Our amendment 14 seeks to do just that, ensuring that employer representative bodies will not just consult but reach agreement with metro Mayors, LEPs and local authorities prior to the publication of the LSIP. There are many concerns that LSIPs as currently envisaged will focus on strategies to help those closest to the labour market who can most easily slot in and solve employers' skills shortages. Our amendment 16, inspired by my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham, seeks to ensure that local skills improvement plans list specific strategies to support learners who have had a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan, which will include supported internships.

Since 2010, the Government have consistently undermined the sector with the scale of their funding cuts, particularly to adult education. By scrapping Connexions, they left a generation of schoolchildren without careers advice. The introduction of the levy has seen starts decline, priced small and medium-sized enterprises out of the system, seen entry-level apprenticeships plunge, and prevented many 16 to 24-year-olds from gaining their first rung on the ladder. That is why we have proposed amendment 13, which enacts the policy announced by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) at the Labour party conference that reintroduces statutory two weeks' worth of work experience and face-to-face careers guidance for every pupil, which was foolishly abolished by the 2010-15 coalition Government. We also seek to ensure that schools are assessed and recognised for the quality of their work experience and careers guidance offer, just as they are on other aspects of their provision.

I will not go through all the remaining 29 amendments proposed by hon. and right hon. Members, but I express particular support for new clause 2 in the name of the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) and others. Without that, there is no lifetime skills guarantee. We should recall what the Prime Minister said in his much-heralded Exeter College speech in September 2020:

"Of the workforce in 2030, ten years from now, the vast majority are already in jobs right now. But a huge number of them are going to have to change jobs—to change skills—and at the moment, if you're over 23, the state provides virtually no free training to help you."

I agree. Yet this Bill, which seeks to give legislative form to that speech, would exclude the very people that the Prime Minister was referring to. Indeed, we believe that the right hon. Member for Harlow's amendment does not go far enough, and we tabled an amendment in Committee more closely aligned with new clause 7, proposed by the right hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), but at least new clause 2 would make a lifetime skills guarantee for the first level 3 qualification a statutory right.

We also support the right hon. Member for Harlow's new clause 3—the so-called Baker clause—which would ensure that every pupil had three meaningful interactions with the world of work at each of the three key phases of their education. This would ensure that more students would have more informed choices about their career options and the wide range of opportunities open to them. The right hon. Gentleman has been outspoken about the ways in which the current Baker clause, which he oversaw in his time in Government, is not working, and we support his intention to address it today. He, and the right hon. Member for Kingswood and the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), propose amendments that ask very valid questions of Ministers. I hope that their lordships will take notice of the level of support that there is for strengthening the Bill and preventing what is currently set to be a huge missed opportunity. I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) has once again brought to our attention his new clause 13 concerning sharia-compliant loans, while in her new clauses 14 and 15 the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) poses some important questions concerning the lack of a coherent energy transition strategy.

This Bill remains a huge missed opportunity that will not offer the reform needed for our country to tackle the very real skills shortages that blight our local economies and damage the life chances of individuals across our communities. We hope that the Government will recognise that Opposition Members, and many of their own Members, wish to help them strengthen the Bill—the same is true of Members in the other place—and that they will look kindly on our amendments without the need for them to be pressed to a vote. We also hope that an approach will emerge that sees employers, metro Mayors, local authorities and others work collectively to develop a skills and qualifications system fit for purpose and able to compete with the very best across the world.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I remind everybody that at Report stage those making contributions should really be referring to the amendments or new clauses—this is not the time for general speeches.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): In rising to speak to my new clauses 1, 2 and 3, I give notice that I do not intend to press them to a Division.

The Government have already made it clear that they will make changes to prisoner apprenticeships. I am conscious of the financial considerations that need to be given to new clause 2. I have faith that the Secretary of State for Education believes deeply in skills and vocational education, and I hope to be able to continue to work with him to make improvements with regard to careers guidance and the Baker clause. I thank the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) for his support for my new clauses.

I welcome this Bill, which will revitalise an incredibly important part of the education sector that has seen its per-student funding reduced since 2010, although it is now going up again. The lifetime skills guarantee, the kickstart programme and the increase in support for FE colleges offer a revolutionary approach to building an

apprenticeship and skills nation like never before. I commend the Secretary of State, Ministers and the former skills Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), on bringing forward this legislation.

Emma Hardy *rose*—

Robert Halfon: I am delighted to give way to a former member of the Education Committee.

Emma Hardy: Like my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), I support the right hon. Gentleman's new clauses. Does he agree that we urgently need the lifelong loan entitlement consultation before we try to bring forward primary legislation—this Bill—to ensure that when that legislation comes, it actually deals with the problem that we are all trying to address?

Robert Halfon: I am all for consultations, but I want this Bill to happen as soon as possible. I have wanted something like this for many years. I do have issues with it that I am going to talk about, but I am very excited about it and just want it to happen without any further delay.

As I mentioned, I support the Bill as a whole, but I have always lived and worked by the mantra, “Good, better, best.” When I was growing up and learning to walk, my old physio used to say, “Good, better, best, may you never rest, until your good is better and your better is your best”—it is the sort of thing you see on a toilet wall sometimes, but it has been my mantra, and it is what I want for this Bill. That is why I proposed these three new clauses to make sure that the ladder of opportunity can be extended to those most in need.

7 pm

New clause 1 aims to ensure that prisoners can start apprenticeships while serving their sentences. The Education Committee is doing an inquiry on prison education, and investment in prison education is key to lowering reoffending rates, which are currently at 42% and are much higher for young offenders. That will strengthen the workforce and help to meet our skills needs as a nation.

The proportion of offenders in employment one year after release is just 17%. The absence of apprenticeships in prisons is a huge obstacle to improving employment outcomes. That is why I was delighted to welcome the work the Secretary of State has done in collaboration with the Justice Secretary to begin to introduce apprenticeships and other provisions to create a skills and training bridge to employment. That will help ex-offenders to find skilled work and will potentially save the taxpayer £18 billion in terms of the cost of reoffending. It is a win-win situation, and I thank the Secretary of State and the Justice Secretary for really tackling the issue. For that reason, I am content not to press new clause 1, but I ask the Minister in his response to provide a timeframe for when the new regulations to introduce prisoner apprenticeships will be laid.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): My right hon. Friend came to my constituency to visit Thorn Cross prison and to look at the education taking place in that open prison. Does he agree that it is because of

[*Andy Carter*]

businesses such as Timpson, which spends a lot of time working with prisoners and former prisoners, that we can ensure that many prisoners leaving the confines of prison find meaningful employment? However, it is important that we help those prisoners with that transition, so starting things such as apprenticeships in prison is really important.

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend is right. By the way, the prison that the Select Committee visited is an extraordinary place—it was like going to a further education college for prisoners in category D. It had a jobcentre to get the prisoners into work and into skilled jobs. It is the kind of prison that should be replicated around the country.

As for Timpson, no one could say anything bad about that wonderful company—I say that as someone who gets his shoes, his belt and his watch fixed there. I have met employees who are former convicts, and they are extraordinary people. Timpson is a remarkable company and I hope that many other companies follow its example—just so that you are clear, Mr Deputy Speaker, I do not get any money for this, and I have no interest to declare.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): New clause 1 is excellent, and I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that it is good news that the Department and the Ministry of Justice want to work together on it. However, will he join me in urging Ministers to take special note of the position of women offenders and of the opportunities that apprenticeships can offer them?

Robert Halfon: As so often, the hon. Lady has got it absolutely right, and I am sure the Secretary of State has heard what she said. I hope very much that that is part of the regulations that he and the Justice Secretary introduce.

New clause 2 would provide funding for level 2 education and skills training for any person of any age, providing that they can demonstrate their intent to progress to level 3. The Education Committee's adult skills and lifelong learning inquiry identified significant problems with low basic skills. Over 9 million working-age adults have poor literacy or numeracy skills, and 6 million adults do not have a level 2 qualification. Some 49% of adults from the lowest socioeconomic group have received no training since leaving school, and in the last 10 years just 17% of low-paid workers moved permanently out of low pay.

The lifelong learning entitlement is a really welcome intervention, allowing adults to undertake level 3 qualifications—the equivalent of an A-level—to retrain for different and better-paid jobs. However, we know that many of these adults will not have the skills needed to go straight into level 3 without further support. Level 2 qualifications are a key stepping-stone for progression for low-skilled adults. They provide those who have left school without GCSEs or equivalent qualifications with a vital chance of learning. Not having that stepping-stone of support is like asking someone who has little maths ability to dive straight into the deep end of A-levels without first learning to swim by taking GCSEs.

However, I recognise that there is a financial cost and that we are in difficult financial times. In 2018-19—the last year before covid—the adult education budget had a £56 million underspend nationally. More recently the trend of underspend has continued. In London only £110.6 million—60.7% of the £182 million given out to grant-funded providers through the adult education budget—had been spent by April 2021.

Investing in level 2 provision provides value for money for the taxpayer. Estimates suggest that for every £1 spent the net value is £21 and that could contribute an additional £28 billion to the economy. The Further Education Trust for Leadership review estimates that an additional £1.9 billion per year could be used to fund level 2 qualifications in maths, English and digital skills for the 4.7 million adults without such qualifications.

I get the financial restraints, which is why I will not press this new clause to a Division. However, I ask that the Government genuinely commit to look at funding options in the next spending review and particularly at using the underspend from budgets such as the adult education budget, even if they just introduce these provisions for maths and English. I would welcome the Minister's views on that when he responds.

Finally, let me turn to the new clause I care most about. New clause 3 seeks to increase the number of careers guidance encounters that young people have at school and to toughen up what is called the Baker clause. As has been mentioned, I was the skills Minister responsible for bringing in the Baker clause in 2017, but despite the good intentions of all involved it has not been implemented correctly.

Mr Perkins: I have had so many encounters with young people doing apprenticeships. When I have spoken to them, they have said, "Although I'm doing an apprenticeship, they were hardly spoken about at school." Everyone at their school seemed to be funnelled towards the sixth form, and lots of their friends and families had not heard of apprenticeships. That is precisely why this new clause is so important. We need to make sure that every young person, whether an A-grade student or not, has the opportunity to consider apprenticeships and other alternative strategies, as well as sixth form. That is why I really welcome this new clause, and I strongly encourage the right hon. Gentleman to put it to a vote.

Robert Halfon: I thank the hon. Gentleman, and he is absolutely right. I go all over the country, and my first speech in this House was about apprenticeships and careers. I have done everything possible since I have been an MP to promote apprenticeships across the country, and I have employed apprentices in my office. Whenever I go around the country and meet apprentices, the most depressing thing is that eight out of 10 say their schools told them nothing about apprenticeships—sometimes it is nine out of 10, and sometimes it is 10 out of 10. Worse, I have met degree apprentices doing the most incredible, high-quality apprenticeships in engineering or whatever it may be who have offered to go back to their schools to talk to the kids—to do one of those encounters—about apprenticeships, but the schools have said no. Why? Because we have a culture in this country of university, university, university. That is partly because every teacher has to be a graduate, and I hope that the Secretary of State will one day allow

degree apprenticeships in teaching, not just postgraduate degrees in teaching. We have a culture that is university, university, university, when it should be skills, skills, skills.

The reason why I am not pushing the new clause is that, in my discussions with Ministers, they say they are going to deal with this problem properly. If I did not believe them, I promise you I would bring through the new clause, and those in the House who know me and who know how I campaign know that.

Jim Shannon *rose*—

Robert Halfon: How can I not give way to the great man opposite?

Jim Shannon: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. His last point, which was reiterated by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), is particularly important. Not every person is academically inclined. Not every person can get a degree. Not every person can progress in education. However, many people can grasp the opportunity of an apprenticeship. Back in Northern Ireland, which the Bill is not aimed at, we try to make those opportunities available through secondary schools and further education colleges. Businesses come in and show pupils the opportunities so that they can grasp that this is something they can succeed at. It is about giving young people the expectation and the opportunity to do something that they want to do and to do it well.

Robert Halfon: Of course I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The only thing I would say is that we must never see apprenticeships and skills as something lesser, or say that someone doing skills is not good enough for university or academia. It is quite the opposite, actually, with many apprentices now earning more than graduates. Graduates often cannot get jobs, and apprentices are getting higher wages.

To do an apprenticeship, gain a skill or go to an FE college is a great thing in life that should be seen as prestigious. We should not look down on that. The hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) talked about the Cinderella sector but, as I have always said, we should not forget that Cinderella became a member of the royal family. We should banish the two ugly sisters of snobbery and underfunding, which I hope the Secretary of State wants to do.

It grieves me to say that schools are not complying with the Baker clause, which has been mentioned in interventions. How can it be, if we are trying to build a skills nation, that we are not giving young people the chance to learn about the technical and vocational educational pathways that exist to support their careers? I worry about the traditionalists, still running rampant, who just want everyone to go to some kind of old-fashioned Oxbridge-type university. As I said, their attitude is university, university, university, when it should be skills, skills, skills. We need the curriculum to better prepare people for the world of work. It should be “Goodbye, Mr Chips” and “Hello, James Dyson” and I urge Ministers to listen to James Dyson—I will be inviting him to the Education Committee for our skills inquiry—because he and many others understand what needs to happen to the curriculum.

My new clause 3 would toughen up the legislation and require schools, technical colleges and apprenticeship providers to talk to pupils about vocational options. It would provide for nine careers guidance meetings in total, with three in each key year group—years 8 and 9, years 10 and 11 and years 12 and 13—rather than just the miserly current offer of three meetings in total. One meeting a year is nothing. We need this stuff going on all the time, with as much encouragement as possible. I actually think that asking for just three meetings a year is low and cautious, so I am trusting the Government to move at least some of the way on this.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time. I speak as a former careers adviser and someone who used to train careers advisers, so this is music to my ears. I speak as a former adviser not through being in this place but because the right to and guarantee of impartial professional careers guidance have been decimated over time. I support the good intentions behind new clause 3 and agree 100% that we need parity of esteem between vocational and so-called academic education.

Robert Halfon: I really appreciate that support. The hon. Gentleman knows so much about this area, so having his backing means a lot.

I have visited my wonderful Harlow College nearly 100 times since being elected in 2010. FE colleges and apprenticeship providers give disadvantaged people the chance to climb the educational ladder of opportunity and to meet our skills needs. They earn while they learn—no debt to worry about—and they get a good wage, and 90% of them get jobs in the company that employed them as an apprentice. We have much to do on this, but we will only change things in this country if we transform the culture around careers. We really mean it when we say that we want people to go into schools and encourage a skills-based education and that the curriculum must prepare people for the world of work.

I stress again—this is my final point, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I know many people want to speak—that this lifetime skills Bill is a wonderful Bill. I am incredibly happy that it is backed by billions of pounds, which should be welcomed. We are offering every single person a level 3 qualification in a core subject, which is revolutionary. We are giving more support for further education, which is wonderful. I just ask the Minister to accept my suggestion or to really move on this to make a difference, so that when it comes to levelling up we know that skills, apprenticeships and further education are No. 1 in the Government’s priorities.

7.15 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I rise to speak in support of new clauses 14, 15 and 11, which at their core support a just transition for North sea oil and gas workers by removing the barriers they face in transitioning into renewable energy, and ensuring that they can access the support and training needed. I may press new clause 14 to a vote if necessary.

In recent weeks, Ministers have rightly emphasised the need to support oil and gas workers. However, they have done so by resorting to more investment in extraction in the North sea, contradicting the advice of the

[Clive Lewis]

International Energy Agency and threatening the ambition of the Glasgow climate pact to limit the global temperature rise to 1.5°.

Research published in 2020 by Friends of the Earth Scotland, Platform and Greenpeace shone a light on the experiences of offshore oil and gas workers—I will come to some of their comments in a minute—and revealed a high level of concern about employment, job security and working conditions. However, it also showed a significant appetite to be a part of the transition to a zero-carbon economy, with over 80% of those surveyed saying they would consider moving to a job outside the oil and gas industry and over half choosing to transition into renewables and offshore wind if they had the opportunity to retrain and were supported in doing so. New clauses 14 and 15 would help to realise that ambition, while ensuring that in achieving our climate goals we do not leave communities behind and repeat the mistakes of the past.

The Minister may point to the North sea transition deal, announced by the Government last year. However, in reality that initiative has failed to provide any real support for workers to transition into renewables, either in investment or policy. Unfortunately, as things stand, training is a barrier and not a passport to future success. Training certificates for wind energy and the oil and gas industry are not transferable between the sectors or recognised by the two separate training standards bodies, with both OPITO and the Global Wind Organisation claiming that their training courses are too specific.

That means that offshore workers seeking to transition into renewables from oil and gas are required to complete entirely new training courses, which often come at a prohibitive cost. That is an insurmountable barrier for workers who are already paying an average of £1,800 a year, out of their own pockets, to maintain their training and safety qualifications. While some courses are unique to different environments, many cover core skills that run across the offshore energy sector, including first aid, fire safety and working at heights. Rather than narrowly focusing on courses, we should move to a skills-based approach, with standardised training where possible and top-up training available for specific environments.

Paul, an offshore oil and gas worker, says very clearly that the

“biggest problem that faces the energy work force wanting to make the transition from offshore oil and gas to renewables is the cost of the extra training needed. Some of the GWO (renewable training governing body) training is essential but most of it is a duplication of the courses used in offshore oil and gas.”

That comment is reinforced by Jack, another worker, who says he has

“thought about working in renewables, but that’d be thousands of pounds you’d have to pay to work in both industries. It’d just be too much, it costs an absolute fortune just to stay in one sector... Shelling out all this money does cause stress, and it does have an impact on your family and your living costs. There are lots of people worrying about how they’re going to pay the mortgage.”

This situation simply cannot go on.

Before recess, the Government announced that they were hitting the

“accelerator on low-cost renewable power”

by moving to annual contracts for difference auctions, yet to genuinely realise this ambition, offshore workers

must be supported to transition into renewables, not face multiple barriers to do that. This is a skilled workforce whose knowledge and experience are absolutely essential if we are to achieve the UK’s climate goals in a timely manner.

What would these amendments do? New clause 14 would require the Secretary of State to produce and implement a strategy to achieve the cross-sector recognition of core skills and training in the offshore energy sector, and to ensure that training standards bodies adopt a transferable skills and competency-based approach to training. Crucially, this strategy would apply to all workers whether they are directly employed or contract workers, and they would have to be consulted in its development. This amendment would enable oil and gas workers to access jobs in renewable energy. It would also mean that, while there are not sufficient jobs in renewable energy as capacity continues to be built up, workers are able to take contracts in both sectors and then move between them. It would prevent a skills drains as people leave the energy sector altogether due to difficulties with finding work, and the cost and time involved in maintaining training certificates.

New clause 15, which is complementary, would establish a retraining guarantee for oil and gas workers seeking to leave the sector, thereby supporting them in transitioning to green energy jobs. It would also ensure that they are able to access advice on suitable jobs based on their existing skillsets, as well as the funding and training needed to transition. Again, all oil and gas workers are eligible for the retraining guarantee, as well as those who have recently left the sector. This amendment would provide clear pathways for oil and gas workers into clean energy, meaning they are not left behind in transitioning to a zero-carbon economy. It would also be infinitely more affordable if accompanied by new clause 14, meaning that workers are not required to duplicate training courses. Amendment 11 would ensure that the new clauses are applicable to Scotland, which is of course essential to facilitate a just transition for workers in the North sea.

These amendments are backed by the workers who operate in this industry. Crucially, they reflect the concerns of workers and their call for cross-sector recognition of skills and training. Some 94% of respondents to a 2021 survey of offshore workers said that they would support an offshore passport that licenses accredited workers to work offshore in any sector through a cross-industry minimum training requirement. An offshore training passport is also backed by the RMT and Unite Scotland. These organisations have also called for the establishment of a training fund for the offshore passport as part of the North sea transition deal. The RMT is backing these amendments, and as Lewis—no relation—a drilling consultant from Aberdeen with 40 years of experience in the oil industry, says, “An offshore passport would be a fantastic thing. I think it is absolutely brilliant and essential for my future.”

As it stands, the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill is a missed opportunity for climate. A recent Green Alliance report revealed a significant skills shortage in every major sector of the economy, from energy efficiency to battery manufacturing and the energy industry. The Bill could have been an opportunity to close the green skills gap and prepare us for the zero-carbon economy of the future. On Second Reading, the Secretary of State said:

“Skills are about investing in people all across our country, about strengthening local economies”.—[*Official Report*, 15 November 2021; Vol. 703, c. 381.]

These amendments would deliver just that, ensuring that offshore oil and gas workers are able to gain the training and skills they need to access good green jobs, while ensuring that we support communities affected by the UK’s transition to a zero-carbon economy and maintain vibrant local economies. These amendments also complement the objectives of the Bill to

“ensure everyone, no matter where they live or their background, can gain the skills they need to progress in work at any stage of their lives”,

and to

“increase productivity, support growth industries and give individuals opportunities to progress in their careers.”

I hope that the Government look closely at these amendments and recognise that there is much more they need to do to genuinely support oil and gas workers and to make a just transition in this sector a reality.

Mr Perkins: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for adding his name to this amendment, as a lead sponsor, and I think he has made a very important point. Coming off the back of COP26 and all the warm words we heard then, does he agree with me that for the Government, over the course of the next six months, simply to publish an energy sector skills strategy—we are not expecting them to go any further than that at this stage, but simply to show that they have a plan—is the very least that people listening to those warm words from the Prime Minister at COP26 would expect?

Clive Lewis: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I agree entirely. We can already see, before the ink is dry on the COP26 agreement, that the Government are back-tracking. We only have to look at history. Many Conservative Members will look at what happened in the 1980s with the demise of the mining industry and say, “Well, we were the first to ensure that we decarbonised our economy”, when actually this was a tragedy. If we look at what happened with deindustrialisation and what happened in the mining industry, we see that actually the whole reason for the necessity of the levelling-up agenda is that there was not a just transition. This is an opportunity for us to ensure that we do not make the same mistakes as we have in the past, and that we play our part in making sure that we get to net zero in a timely manner. I think that is what most people in this House and out in the country would want, and on that I shall finish.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak today in support of the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill. Ensuring that everyone has access to high-quality training and education throughout their lives is vital. I come from a family of teachers, and I retrained in my 40s so that I myself could teach, so I am particularly passionate about the opportunities that the Bill will open up. I want to take this opportunity to highlight the support of my local FE college for some of tonight’s proposed amendments.

Much is said of talent being spread equally across our country, but opportunity is not. That is particularly true in North Devon: it is not just in the country where opportunity is not equally spread, but in our county as

well. We are over 60 miles from any university, and our youngsters do not in general see university as a natural next step post 18. Devon is particularly short of highly-qualified young people. Just 24% of 20 to 29-year-olds have a degree, which is one of the lowest levels in the country. It is against this backdrop that our excellent and sole further education college, Petroc, which educates over 9,000 learners and works with hundreds of employers, is well placed not only to welcome this Bill, but to highlight areas it would like to see strengthened.

Like me, the college highlights how coastal and rural areas such as North Devon have particular challenges that are masked by aggregating data, even to a county level, when our county is the size of Devon and has such variance in opportunity across its beautiful rural and coastal spread. The college was keen that I should highlight its support for new clause 7, as it is particularly concerned that the lifetime skills guarantee includes subsequent level 3 courses, so that those without an A-level or equivalent qualification, or those who hold such a qualification but would benefit from reskilling, are able to study on a fully-funded and approved course. This would facilitate adults being able to remain in North Devon and acquire new skills, enabling them to take advantage of the new jobs opening up in the area, whereas at present staying in North Devon means remaining in low-paid, low-skill employment, despite the multiple high-skilled job vacancies that do not match our local skill base.

We also hope that steps can be taken to revisit universal credit conditionality, as in new clause 5, so that those on benefits are encouraged to increase their skills to enable them to seek better employment. I recognise the challenges in this space, but similarly we need to encourage those who, due to the seasonality of our vital tourism and hospitality economy, spend part of each year on universal credit, as in North Devon, to upskill so that they can work throughout the year, as well as to encourage employers to stay open longer and extend our tourism season, given the growth in winter visitors we have seen post pandemic.

North Devon, like many other remote, rural and coastal locations, has particular challenges in raising aspiration, improving educational outcomes and enabling adults to upskill.

Emma Hardy: The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech and I just want to echo the support for universal credit conditionality. I represent an urban seat that faces similar but different challenges from hers, and I completely support the idea that universal credit should still be allowed; we do not have an issue of seasonal workers, but we do have an issue of people on universal credit not always being able to get the opportunity to do the training they want, because they are forced to take zero-hours contracts instead. As the hon. Lady says, there is opportunity everywhere, but only if we make it so. I just wanted to speak in support of what she was saying on this.

7.30 pm

Selaine Saxby: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. The right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and I spend much time discussing the opportunities of universal credit on the Select Committee on Work and Pensions.

[Selaine Saxby]

Unlike the cities, remote rural and coastal locations such as those in my constituency face particular challenges in raising aspiration, improving educational outcomes and enabling adults to upskill. It is vital that more acknowledgement be given to the needs of these communities, which do not always fit well into a city-centric system. I very much hope there will be opportunities to work with the new education team to further develop this vital Bill, so that it works even better for remote and rural constituencies and really does deliver equal opportunity across communities such as North Devon.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): We know that a Bill is flawed when not one, not two, but three previous Education Secretaries and Ministers from across the political spectrum seek to amend it. The Lords Baker, Blunkett and Willetts worked hard to stop the ending of funding for BTECs, qualifications taken by more than 250,000 students last year, so it is a shame that the Government sought to remove the Lords amendment. I back amendment 15 in the name of the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), which supports funding for BTECs for a further four years.

The Liberal Democrats support T-levels, but the newer courses are only 25% practical and 75% academic, which puts them out of reach of some students who achieve lower grades in their GCSEs—exactly the cohort who flourish on the employment-focused BTEC pathway. We need to allow T-levels extra time to bed in. Frankly, an extra year for BTECs, as proposed by the Secretary of State, is simply not enough.

New clause 11, which is in my name, seeks to address a gap that we have identified in support for 16-year-olds as they transition within the education system. This gap exacerbates inequalities. Some young people face making life-changing decisions on the spot, with no clear idea about their options and the likely consequences. One example I heard from my constituency involved two boys who did not quite make their expected GCSE grades. Their chosen very popular local school for sixth form refused to offer them a place on their choice of A-level courses, because others with higher grades were prioritised ahead of them, and only offered them places on under-subscribed, less academic courses. A decision had to be made immediately. One of the boys had parents who had not been to university, and who struggled to provide him with appropriate advice; he was not offered advice from elsewhere. That cannot be right.

Unlike reception, 11-plus, and even university admissions, there is no oversight of 16-plus admissions, yet arguably it is the most crucial point—a time when a student's options are permanently narrowed. There is no central body managing the process, no appeals process, and no data gathered to track whether the local offer matches what the learners want to study. That is why my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and I have tabled an amendment that would give local authorities the powers and resources to run admissions for this crucial 16-plus transition in the same way that they do for primary and secondary education, and it would include a full register to ensure no young person slips through the cracks. Although I will not press this amendment to a Division tonight, I hope Ministers will look seriously at this important issue, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

There are many good amendments on local skills improvement plans, and it is important that recommendations be taken on board from bodies such as the Local Government Association, who would require LSIPs to be developed in partnership with local authorities and further education providers. The views of interested parties such as local employers, and other education providers including universities, must be taken into consideration, too. Also, the needs of disabled people should be front and centre when developing all these plans and policies, as one of the amendments suggests.

Finally, on universal credit, I am incredulous that a Government who claim they want to make work pay and move people from welfare into high-quality, well-paid jobs—which all of us across the House would support—have removed a Lords amendment allowing students to keep their universal credit entitlement while studying. Education is the pathway between unemployment and fulfilling, interesting, valuable employment, so why would any barriers and disincentives be placed in the way? I urge the Government to reconsider their position on this issue and to support new clause 5, which comes from their own Back Benchers.

In conclusion, this Bill gives us the chance to realise that education should be an opportunity for life, whatever people's circumstances. That opportunity should be freely available, whether to a young person starting out in life, a parent who is ready to go back to study, or someone who wants to retrain to improve their job prospects. Given the immense skills shortages this country is facing, and the green and digital revolutions we are experiencing, this Bill is a very welcome step forward, but it has serious flaws. It is a shame that some excellent amendments from the Lords have been thrown out, and that a number of those in today's amendment paper are not being considered or accepted by this Government. I urge them in particular to look again at the defunding of BTECs, transitional arrangements for 16 year-olds, and barriers to education for those on universal credit.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We need to start the wind-ups at a quarter to nine, so if everybody could take about six minutes—interestingly, the last speaker's contribution was exactly six minutes—we should all be able to get in, and I will not have to introduce a time limit.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): I will do my best, Madam Deputy Speaker, to squeeze my remarks on the 12 amendments in my name into six minutes, but I apologise in advance if I run slightly over.

To echo the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), we are all here to make a good Bill better—to make it the best possible Bill—and I hope that the Minister will reflect on my amendments, which I do not intend to press to a Division, so that we can continue the dialogue and make sure that the Bill truly shines by the end of this democratic process.

My new clause 4 would require the Secretary of State to publish a green skills strategy. This has been recommended by the Institute for Government and the Confederation of British Industry, and has been backed by several Members from across the House. The

Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for Education have already commissioned a report from the new green jobs taskforce, which laid out several recommendations on how to deliver on the Government's green jobs target in the "Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution". That included publishing a net-zero strategy to promote good green jobs, yet we know that the UK will need 170,000 more workers to qualify each year in home insulation, renewable energy and electric vehicle manufacturing, and infrastructure upgrades if we are to meet our net-zero targets. The think-tank Onward has predicted that approximately 1.7 million jobs will need to be created in the net-zero industries by 2030, of which 1.3 million are in occupations that require strong, low and medium-level technical qualifications, which are in critically short supply. It is a no-brainer: the Government should make the concession at the Dispatch Box, either in this House or the other place, that we should, although perhaps not in this Bill, look at publishing a green skills strategy. That is vital for the joined-up thinking and whole-of-Government approach that is needed for net zero.

I will seek to bundle up the next series of amendments, appropriately enough, into mini amendment modules, but I first declare an interest: I tabled these amendments as chair of the Lifelong Education Commission, which I established in lockdown; having been reshuffled out of Government, I decided, with time on my hands, that I would set up this commission. I have received administrative support from the think-tank ResPublica, which has helped me prepare the amendments and a number of reports.

New clause 6 would require the Secretary of State to publish an annual report on overall skills levels and economic output across England and Wales. It can be taken with amendments 7 and 8, which would require careers advisers to hold a level 4 qualification, and which would give local authorities oversight of the provision of careers guidance for the purposes of ensuring consistency and quality. If the Bill is to succeed, there needs to be a better joined-up effort to monitor changes in the UK's skills provision and how that is reflected in the economy. An annual report would allow data sets to be created that would provide information at national and local levels, so that areas of success and concern could be identified for targeted support. That should cover all qualifications from entry level to level 8, and details should be given on the size and composition of each cohort.

To help local authorities better craft their local skills improvement plans, such a review should include relevant information about local labour markets, and data on job retention, labour market turnover, and different measures of labour productivity. That is important for transparency, but we should be mindful of the need to balance that against data burdens on institutions, including education providers. An annual report should therefore build on existing work carried out in market intelligence on post-16 skills and education data.

On careers advice, the level 4 qualification requirement that I set out in amendment 7 should apply to all school, college and university career advisors. The Government should also take steps to ensure that mandatory registration with the Career Development Institute is not needlessly burdensome or expensive.

That means crafting a national careers strategy at the same time, and working closely with further education colleges, who are best placed to design and deliver dedicated careers advisory courses.

I turn to new clause 7, which I will consider with amendment 3. The new clause would place the Government's lifetime skills guarantee on a statutory footing, ensuring that those without an A-level or equivalent qualification, or those who hold such a qualification but would benefit from reskilling, can study a fully funded approved course. Retraining or reskilling sometimes means gaining a qualification a lower level than others that we have already reached in our learning trajectory, and anyone who wants to gain an equivalent or lower qualification should be able to access Government funding for that.

The ELQ rules should be explicitly removed as a condition for claiming a lifelong loan entitlement. Neither the lifetime skills guarantee nor the lifelong loan entitlement are truly lifelong if people who already have a level 3 to level 6 qualification are excluded from obtaining any more funding. The programme needs to be as broad and simple as possible to encourage—not discourage—participation, and should cover all provision up to level 3, irrespective of whether learners are taking a full qualification or taking one for the first time. That means removing all barriers, including any limits on repeating level 3 qualifications.

Amendment 3 would expand financial support for higher and further education courses to include means-tested grants for the purposes of ensuring that financial hardship is not a barrier to reskilling. The Bill still has limited detail about the exact structure of the LLE and how it will operate, such as the minimum credit level required to access it. In the light of that, I welcome the launch of a panel under the Minister for Higher and Further Education to review the structure and purpose of the LLE. As long as the LLE relies on a system of loans rather than grants, it will be difficult to encourage uptake in adult skills improvement among young people without assets, savings or other reserves to serve as a financial cushion. The LLE therefore risks becoming a clear case of inequity between age groups in the education system. An 18-year-old choosing which education path to go down will have a different perspective on loan debt from someone in their 30s, 40s or 50s. As we advance through our careers, we accumulate more financial commitments, such as rent or mortgage payments and the costs of family care and support, and that makes career jumps much harder to undertake than career starts. A proper commitment to lifelong learning needs an explicit national decision about what we are prepared to fully fund. We need a national system of means-tested grants, targeted at the most disadvantaged.

I turn to new clause 8, which I will consider with new clause 9. New clause 8 would require the Secretary of State to publish a national strategy for integrated education. It would set out a plan for developing courses that had a mixture of academic and vocational content at levels 4 to 8, and would support the creation and expansion of institutions offering such courses. New clause 9 would require the Secretary of State to set out a framework of national guidelines for the unbundling, stacking and transfer of modular course credits between institutions. It would also set out a role for Ofqual, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and the Institute

[Chris Skidmore]

for Apprenticeships and Technical Education to ensure that such a framework operates effectively. I will not go into further details on that; needless to say, such flexibilities need to be worked out at a far more granular level, and any credit system will need to be more sophisticated than just letting learners accrue a certain number of points.

7.45 pm

Points need to be acquired in the right mix across introductory and intermediate modules. Degree-level qualifications should be awarded to someone with enough credits only if they complete a capstone module, drawing together and encouraging reflections on the overall and connected learning. One of the main barriers to transfer is how applicable a learner's past skills and qualifications are to the awards into which they are to transfer. In addition to a national framework for unbundling and stacking, we need a mechanism for moving between awards frameworks such as from apprenticeships to T-levels or higher technical qualifications. That will require a clear and transparent framework for how different regulators can interact.

New clause 10 covers the role of employers and employees reskilling. Needless to say, it would require businesses to offer their employees a minimum amount of in-work skills development and redundancy training to be funded by a skills tax credit along very much the same lines as research and development tax credits. Employers should do more to support their employees to improve their skills, including helping those whom they have recently made redundant to retrain.

I turn to amendments 4, 5 and 6 on lifelong learning strategies as part of the future devolution of skills. They would expand the membership of local skills improvement plans to include other local organisations and extend the Secretary of State's power to designate and remove employer representative bodies to mayoral combined authorities where that is within their devolved competences. Local authorities need to play a leading role in the plans alongside business, the arts, further and higher education, faith and third-sector community organisations. Skills and education policy must be a central part of future devolution deals. I will not go into any further detail, but I encourage the Minister to look closely at the content of my amendments and to work closely with all Members on how we can make this the best possible Bill by taking up all the amendments mentioned.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): To be of assistance, I am going to put in place a six-minute time limit. If we cannot stick to my helpful guidance, not everybody will get in.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): We are having an interesting debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) on the case that he set out from the Front Bench by rightly highlighting that, every couple of years, the Government say they will solve the skills problem by putting employers at the centre, and it never works, so they come back and do the same thing again. He was also right to highlight the failure of the apprenticeship levy, about which the Government were warned.

I rise to speak to new clause 13 in my name. Nine years ago, the Government pledged to introduce alternative student finance, but it still has not been delivered, barring large numbers of Muslims from higher education. The problem became a serious one in 2012, when tuition fees were drastically raised and student loans became essential for pretty much everybody. For some British Muslims, having to take an interest-bearing student loan simply meant that they could not go to university at all. Riba—interest—is prohibited in Islam as it was in Christianity until the middle ages. Some Muslim young people defer university until they have saved to pay the fees outright. Some, with a heavy heart, take out a loan and feel bad about it ever after. Others do not attend at all. That is the reality facing young British Muslims today.

Last October, Muslim Census published the findings of a survey on the scale of the problem. It concluded that, every year, 4,000 Muslim students opt out of university altogether because alternative student finance is not available, 6,000 choose to self-fund, severely limiting their course choice and student experience, and four in five who took loans felt conflicted as a result, sometimes leading to mental health consequences requiring clinical intervention. It is in nobody's interests to fail such a large group of bright young people who we need to contribute their full potential in the years ahead. As Prime Minister, David Cameron promised to change that. At the World Islamic Economic Forum in London in 2013, he said:

"Never again should a Muslim in Britain feel unable to go to university because they cannot get a student loan - simply because of their religion."

The promise he made was very clear. Nine years later, there is still not even a timetable for keeping it. It looks to young Muslims as if Ministers simply cannot be bothered.

A year after David Cameron's speech, a Government consultation attracted 20,000 responses—a record at the time—on a proposed *takaful* system, in which students pay into the system to guarantee each other against loss. This co-operative structure is generally recognised as sharia-compliant. Repayments, debt levels and cost to the Government would be the same as for conventional student loans. But progress since then over eight years has been glacial. In November 2015, a Green Paper said:

"we are looking to develop the 'Takaful' product more fully."

A White Paper the following year said there was a "a real need" to support students who felt unable to use interest-bearing loans and that:

"we will introduce an alternative student finance product for the first time"—

which—

"will avoid the payment of interest".

That was seven years ago. In 2017, campaigners hoped the new Higher Education and Research Act 2017 would enable a *takaful* loan model. Ministers then said that the May 2019 Augar review would cover it. It did not, but ever since Ministers have used the forthcoming response to that report as a justification for still not doing anything. The response to the Augar review was supposed to be published at the time of the spending review, but six months later there is still no word.

British Muslims make up nearly 5% of the UK population and almost 10% of students. In the borough I represent, Muslims are about a third of our population. It is extremely hurtful that the Government simply cannot be bothered to keep the promise they made nine years ago to so many people. Thousands of young Muslims miss out on university. Others struggle over the conflict between what they believe and their hopes for higher education. Our system should not be doing that to people, as the Government recognised nine years ago. New clause 13 requires the Secretary of State to at last make the long-awaited regulations. I hope the House and the Minister will support it.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I rise to speak on new clause 4 and will make a brief round-up in support of new clauses 2, 5 and 7.

On new clause 4—our proposal for a green skills strategy—I and others firmly believe that we have a green skills emergency and that net zero cannot happen without know-how. Existing workers, who in some cases are already losing their jobs due to covid or chronic instability in the oil and gas sector, can be brought over to new industries such as wind, low carbon, hydrogen and energy-efficient homes. Meanwhile, young people want to work in sectors they know are good for them and good for the planet. Providing green skills is therefore a positive part of the net zero debate. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister, and the Department, to seize this opportunity, with his leadership and influence over other Departments. Young people will not only be prepared for the future, but provide solutions for the future.

I welcome the much-needed focus on how the country will deliver its net zero targets, and what they mean for individuals and families. That honest conversation cannot come soon enough. We have lived with our 2050 targets for some time now. The majority of people want to protect the planet and ensure they leave a healthy environment for their children, grandchildren and future generations. Yet people are nervous. With inflation and energy prices starting to bite and the cost of paying for the pandemic in the background, it is understandable that suggestions that they are going to be forced into changing their cars, changing the way they live or insulating their homes in an expensive way are quite terrifying for some. However, when I speak to families who are worried about that aspect of the 2050 targets, they are absolutely clear that they recognise there are jobs to be had not only for them, but their children.

We know that the market will do a lot of the work of creating demands for a skilled net zero workforce, but the market also needs help to plug gaps to ensure the right qualifications are in the right place. Unfortunately, education settings are not quite there yet. They need more support to deliver courses and qualifications. My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) made a few points about what we are missing. Only 5% of mechanics know how to fix an electric car. In 2019, only 3,500 workers could install energy-efficient measures. It is estimated that we will need an additional 20,000 engineering graduates a year.

In Stroud, a combination of businesses—Active Building Centre, South Gloucestershire and Stroud College, The Green Register—have come together. We recognise there is a lack of standardisation in qualifications, and a lack

of understanding and confidence on the part of the public around being able to hire people who know what is best for their homes and next steps. If we do not grasp this issue, we will not provide that confidence to the public and to the tradespeople who want to retrain and reskill. They will not invest in a course if they do not think it will be important next year and the year after. They want guidance from the Government and they need to know that the public will believe in it. I fear that if we do not do that, we will end up with cowboys in the market or people not taking the actions we know they need.

It is not just my amazing Stroud experts who talk to me about this issue all the time, but small, medium and big companies. I have had some good conversations with SSE, which was one of the first companies in the world to publish a just transition strategy. It sets out a number of principles for supporting the transition to net zero in a socially just and fair way. Key principles for green jobs and skills include guaranteeing fair and decent work, and attracting and growing talent. It has created principles for action and I urge the Department to look at them if it has not already done so. I believe the example recommendations for the Government fit very neatly into what we think could be a green skills strategy by the Department for Education, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Government as a whole.

Arguably, the Government do not need to wait for Back-Bench MPs to agitate for a green skills strategy and nor does it really need to be in legislation. My hon. Friend the Minister can agree to create a green skills strategy, or get his bosses to do so, and set out a plan to support people to attain education that creates the support and meets environmental goals. I therefore urge the Education team to work with us those of us on the Back Benches to do that work and support the plans. We can certainly bring some fantastic examples to make that a reality.

Very briefly, in conjunction with my local further education college, South Gloucestershire and Stroud College, which the Minister very kindly came to visit, I support new clauses 2 and 7, which put the lifetime skills guarantee on a statutory footing and extend it to level 3 courses, so that those without A-level or equivalent qualifications will still benefit from fully funded courses. I believe that the college spoke to the Minister about that when he was with us. I also support new clause 5, on reforming benefit entitlement rules, so that people on benefits can still attend college while unemployed without losing out. However, I am very grateful for the passage of the Bill at pace.

Kate Green: There are very many sensible amendments before us this evening. I am very pleased to support new clause 16 on adult literacy, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), and to add my name to new clause 13, which my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) has just spoken about, on an issue of great importance to my constituents. Many Muslim families are unable to access non-compliant funding and are forced, as a result, to either wait many years while they save up to pay outright or take out a loan they feel uncomfortable with that is incompatible with their faith. I also know of families who have been able to send only one child to university, an invidious decision for any family to have

[Kate Green]

to make. As we have heard, it is simply ridiculous that nine years after David Cameron first, and rightly, committed to taking action on sharia-compliant funding, we still have no timeline even for when the Government intend to bring forward proposals.

8 pm

I echo what was said about the importance of protecting the option of BTECs. I was very pleased when, on Second Reading, the Secretary of State confirmed at least a one-year extension of funding and said that it would be possible to combine BTECs with A-level study. That combination of vocational and academic study is important in keeping the choices and options open and broad for our young people. Sadly, T-levels will not offer that option. They will take young people uniquely down a vocational route. I urge Ministers, in developing the T-level model, to look at how that can ensure that it does not box off options too early for young people who are forced into a vocational specialisation that limits opportunities for them further down the line.

As a Greater Manchester MP, I also want to talk about the proposals for a role for mayoral combined authorities and local authorities and to support amendment 14, which was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins). The Government amended the Bill in Committee to ensure that due consideration would need to be given to the views of metropolitan combined authorities in developing local skills improvement plans, but that is still too weak, given that the Greater Manchester Combined Authority already has full responsibility for the adult education budget and that its economic and regeneration strategies will drive and determine our skills needs.

I welcome amendment 14 as a means of ensuring that employer representative bodies are representative of the area that they cover. With significant skills gaps in the north, and *The Times* reporting the other day that it will take 17 years for the north-west to catch up with the skills levels of London, it is really important that we have sensible, strategic planning and the involvement of combined authorities and the adult education budget to achieve effective skills planning that can close that gap. I also politely suggest to the Minister that given that the adult education budget is already devolved to Greater Manchester, that infrastructure enables it to highlight and test early and quickly the effectiveness of some of the proposals in the Bill. I am thinking particularly about how regeneration, economic and skills strategies can be joined up and contribute to levelling up.

The Minister said in Committee that statutory guidance would be provided on how the metropolitan combined authorities would be involved in the development of the local skills improvement partnerships and that that would draw on the learning from the trailblazer pilots. Of course, Greater Manchester is not one of the trailblazer areas and I would be grateful if he could assure me, in responding to the debate, that the trailblazer learning will be sufficiently pertinent for areas that are structured quite differently in terms of some of their economic and skills needs. Greater Manchester already has access to data and labour market intelligence and the knowledge of local providers, so the creation of a national provider register must not preclude the combined authority from contributing its local knowledge and expertise.

Finally, I echo the regrets that Members around the Chamber have expressed that the lifetime skills guarantee will not be available for people to take a different level 3 qualification, when one may be currently qualified to work in an industry where jobs are disappearing and becoming obsolete. I also regret that there is no pipeline to enable the guarantee to be used first to enable people to obtain a level 2 qualification, which would lead to them being able to undertake a level 3 course and progress further in due course if they wish. That is really important for us and for economies such as that of Greater Manchester, where we have seen a very significant shift in the kinds of industries and opportunities that exist not only for young people today, but for workers who have been in the workforce for the past 20, 30 and 40 years and who, in their 40s and 50s, face a real fear that they may not be able to work again. I hope that the Minister will take on board the deep concerns that have been expressed around the House about limiting the lifetime skills guarantee in the way that it currently is.

Andy Carter: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and to speak in this debate, because I spoke in the last such debate, and I was part of the Bill Committee, too. I will refer to new clause 1 and touch on new clauses 14 and 15, but I will start by echoing many of the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon). This really is important legislation. Not only does it build on the commitment made in the Government's 2019 manifesto to overhaul the training system in this country—a system that helps to support public services, existing businesses and the businesses of the future—but, most importantly, it prepares our future workforce with the skills that they will need to propel their careers, helping them to secure rewarding, valuable and well-paid jobs.

My recess week very much felt like preparation for this debate. I spent time at University Technical College Warrington meeting the students and their teachers. It is a fantastic skills-based school for young people aged 13 and above, including up to sixth form. I urge the Minister, wherever possible, to promote UTCs, because they provide something very special in many communities across the country.

After that, I joined the Minister for Higher and Further Education, the right hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), on a visit to my sixth-form college, Priestley College, to meet some of the first students in the country who are taking T-levels and, just as importantly, to hear from some of the employers that are offering them placements. It was a fascinating insight that I will talk more about in a second.

On Friday, I then met some of the new work coaches at the jobcentre in Warrington. They are helping people who are looking for work to match their skills to the current vacancies and to help them to navigate, where appropriate, the opportunities that allow them to return to college or to update their qualifications so that they can engage with employers. One of the Bill's fundamental aims is to ensure that people can access training and learn flexibly through their lives with information about what employers really want to see. I pay tribute to the team at the Jobcentre Plus office on Tanners Lane who are very focused on helping young people, in particular,

to find a way into employment through apprenticeships—on the dual effort of people not only getting into work but earning while they are learning.

I mentioned that, on my visit to Priestley College, we heard from some of the young people studying T-levels for the first time. They are the first cohort to do so, with Warrington having been chosen as one of the pioneering locations for the new approach. The message that came back from students was that T-levels were a really positive decision for them. As well as hearing from students who were studying digital production, design and development, and education, we also heard from the managing director of a digital marketing company based in Stockton Heath called Alcimi. It was one of the first companies to offer a placement to the students. What came across clearly was that the business had genuinely benefited from having young students as part of its team for a short period. On top of that, the community benefited because the company had set the students a community-orientated project, and the students had really benefited, because they had been into the workplace and had seen how a digital business worked today and the sort of things that they could expect in future. There is a huge benefit to come from T-levels.

I would like to touch on new clauses 14 and 15, which the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) spoke to. I understand some of the points that he is making with the new clauses. I am very pleased to see the north-west getting support from Government to press ahead with the game-changing HyNet project—dealing with hydrogen carbon capture and storage—creating probably about 5,000 jobs. We will need to improve skills in that area and develop a future workforce. Filling those roles is a huge challenge, but the Government's approach through local skills improvement plans is the route to solving that problem, rather than necessarily forcing this to relate to previous areas of employment, as new clauses 14 and 15 would.

I say to the Minister, and I raised this in Committee, that areas such as Warrington, which sit mid-way between two very large mayoralities—Greater Manchester and Merseyside—have people who grow up and study in one area and will then want to work in the other. It is important to make sure that employers in the wider skills area—perhaps in the mayoralities—that are looking to recruit from somewhere such as Warrington take account of the needs of those areas, too.

Finally, I will briefly mention new clause 1. The Chair of the Education Committee has come to visit Thorn Cross Prison, where a tremendous amount of work is going into retraining prisoners as they come to the end of their time inside. Many of the prisoners there are very keen to engage in their future development with apprenticeships, so I am keen for the Minister to continue to look at that.

I very much welcome the Government's approach. They are tailoring skills and the workforce to the local area, and it is being led by business. I look forward to supporting them this evening.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): According to the National Literacy Trust, more than 7 million adults in England have very poor literacy skills. That is 16.4% of the adult population. Someone who struggles to read and write, or who cannot read or write at all, experiences disadvantage daily. It is a form of deprivation

that can lead to isolation and poverty and cause deep personal frustration, as was clear in Jay Blades's programme "Learning to Read at 51", which I highly recommend to hon. Members and Ministers.

My new clause 16

"would require the Secretary of State to, every two years, review levels of adult literacy in England, publish the findings of that review and set out a strategy to improve levels of adult literacy in England."

We cannot afford to leave people to fend for themselves, barely able to read and write. Of course, it makes no economic sense either.

I also believe that it is important that there is a rich and varied educational offer in all parts of the country, as well as strong skills provision. Education is not just about finding a job, hugely important though that is, but about personal development, engaging with the world, pursuing interests and developing critical thinking. I am concerned that the Bill may lead to a reduced educational offer and a narrowing of educational opportunity because of its focus on employer representative bodies leading the development of local skills improvement plans.

A person living in an area where most available work is in agriculture may want to pursue a completely different career path. How can their local employer representative body cater for them? The Minister will be aware that Billy Elliot lived in a mining community but did not want to go down the mine. His local employer representative body would doubtless have said, "There's no call for ballet dancers round here," so his talent and passion would have gone to waste. Surely it cannot be right that people's ambitions should be constrained by the needs of local employers.

We ignore the value of our cultural sector at our peril. My new clause 17 would require the Secretary of State

"to review the availability of humanities, social sciences, arts and languages courses at Entry level to Level 4 in areas to which an LSIP applies. It would also require the Secretary of State to take steps to remedy inadequate availability of the courses."

From my own experience as an adult education tutor, working in an area of deprivation, I know the importance of offering courses that people can enjoy. I know, too, how transformational adult education can be, and that one of the best ways to support people to access the labour market is to build confidence, expand horizons and offer educational opportunity.

My amendment 18

"would require the Secretary of State to draw on responses to a public consultation run by the relevant local authority, when publishing a local skills improvement plan for a given area."

There is immense expertise and insight in every community, so it makes sense to draw on them. Such a consultation would be open to local providers, educationists and trade unions, as well as the general public. It could prove to be an important local conversation about the potential that is there to be developed.

If adult education is to expand and flourish, it is important that barriers to learning are removed. If someone is in receipt of universal credit, they should not be disincentivised from engaging in training or education, so I support new clause 5, which stands in the name of the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous).

[Margaret Greenwood]

I also support amendment 12, in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), which “would require...a review of the operation of the apprenticeship levy, and...to pay particular regard to ensuring that sufficient apprenticeships at level 3 and below are available”, and new clause 1, in the name of the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), which would enable prisoners to participate in apprenticeships.

I urge the Government to take action to address the very high levels of poor literacy among adults, to ensure the provision of a broad curriculum in adult education that includes the arts, social sciences and humanities as well as vocational training, and to give local people, providers and trade unions the opportunity to have a say in the post-16 education and training made available in their communities.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I welcome the Bill because it provides the means to address problems that have hung over the UK for far too long and to meet future challenges. It has been closely scrutinised, both in this Chamber and in the other place. Some amendments have been made that the Government have accepted, but there is still room for improvement.

I urge the Minister to take on board new clauses 2 and 3, which are in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), and new clause 4, which is in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore). I would also be grateful if the Minister gave full consideration to new clause 5 and amendment 2, which are in my name. New clause 5 would enable people who are trapped in low-paid, insecure roles with limited progression opportunities to acquire the skills to progress into well-paid, secure and rewarding jobs, thereby delivering levelling up and eliminating the productivity gap that has been part of the UK economy for far too long.

8.15 pm

The Bill points in very much the right direction, but if it is to deliver, it must address five issues. First, as the Local Government Association and the CBI both highlight, it must adopt a place-based approach. Secondly, we need inclusivity. While local skills improvement plans will be employer-driven, they must involve all local partners. My amendment 2 provides for LSIPs to be developed in partnership with local further education providers. That approach is supported by EngineeringUK. Other partners, such as local government, local enterprise partnerships and universities, must also be included.

Thirdly, we need co-ordination. EngineeringUK highlights the need for the Government to set out how the steps that they have taken in the Bill will be co-ordinated with the levelling-up and net zero agendas. That leads on to the fourth issue: the need to urgently step up training for low-carbon jobs. The Green Alliance emphasises the need for an integrated skills programme to be developed with individuals, institutions and industry. That can be achieved if the Government accept new clause 4, tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood. Finally, the Bill's potential will not be realised without proper investment. The funding announced in the comprehensive spending review in the autumn was welcome, but it should be viewed as only a start.

My new clause 5, which is supported by the Local Government Association, requests that the Government carry out a review of universal credit conditionality

“to ensure greater flexibility for potential students in receipt of universal credit to take up appropriate training that will better equip them for employment.”

I am grateful to the Minister and to his ministerial colleague the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), for corresponding with me and meeting me to discuss the matter.

With the welcome reduction in the universal credit taper rate, announced in the autumn Budget, and with the more recent Way to Work initiative, the Government have placed much emphasis on the importance of making work pay and on the current high level of job vacancies. I support those measures, but unfortunately many people are at some distance from the workplace and are not able to take advantage of those opportunities. However, many of them will be able to do so if the universal credit conditions are reformed so that they can more readily access education and training.

The barriers to education and training that need to be addressed are numerous. There are excessive and inconsistent restrictions on study hours. The current approach is too short-term. The skills bootcamps initiative is welcome but only temporary, and creates instability and complexity in a system that can be challenging for learners and colleges to navigate.

A review is needed. Too many people who are unemployed are not being directed to advice and training that could get them into a good job, because there is a disconnected system and there are conflicting incentives across education and welfare. More needs to be done to understand the impact of the current welfare system on unemployed people's access to education and training. The cost of taking no action is fewer people in stable and meaningful jobs, slower economic growth and, ultimately, bigger tax burdens.

I can perhaps understand the Government's reluctance to accept a large raft of amendments, but I am not asking for the earth. What new clause 5 seeks is a review of a system that is not working at present. The end result, currently, is that the UK economy suffers and many people are denied the opportunity to better their lives. We owe it to them to remove these barriers.

Emma Hardy: It is always a genuine pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), who spoke passionately and articulately of his desire to support, through new clause 5, the people who need that support the most. It was an excellent speech with which I wholeheartedly agreed.

I will not detain the House for too long in speaking about my amendment 17, which is intended to provide additional support for people with special educational needs and disabled people. The Bill proposes that there should be an employer representative body in each area to create local skills improvement plans, to which colleges would have regard. The implication is that colleges would train their students in the skills that they need, thereby improving the labour supply—that is the theory—but the Bill, in its current form, is silent on how that will work for students with special educational needs or disabilities. One of the aims of the national disability strategy is to reduce the disability employment gap, but

we see no evidence of that in the Bill as it stands. I tried to raise those points in Committee, although unfortunately I missed some of the sittings because of covid.

I would like the Minister to go away and have a look at a few issues. First, LSIPs should explicitly include actions to tackle the disability employment gap. Although there have been positive moves to narrow it in recent years, the gap remains significant. That is one of the points I raised with the Minister in Committee. Figures show that the employment rate of disabled people is 28.4 percentage points lower than that of people who are not disabled.

Secondly, LSIPs should be informed by consultation with organisations representing the needs of disabled people. We know that, all too often, disabled people feel that their voices are not being heard in those forums. I think it will be a missed opportunity if we do not use the Bill, and the new process of local skills planning that it offers, to help ensure that people with disabilities are asked to contribute to their local economy, and that their voices are heard in the discussion about what that future local economy looks like. An amendment to this effect was voted down in Committee but has been incorporated in the Department's statutory guidance. I hope that reviewing the extent to which employer representative bodies acted upon this element of the guidance, and what impact it had, will form part of the evaluation of the LSIP trailblazers.

Finally—this is the issue that amendment 17 seeks to address—the Bill should contain measures to ensure that ERBs are composed of employers who demonstrate reputable practice in relation to equality and diversity in employment, in respect of matters including disability. We do not want a board of employers planning and determining skills policy if they have no record of being inclusive and decent, because without inclusive and decent employers on the board, there will not be an inclusive and decent LSIP. That is why my amendment states:

“Representative bodies which are employers, and employer organisations which are members of employer representative bodies, must sign up to the Disability Confident employer scheme within six months of being designated, or becoming a member of, the employer representative body.”

It is a small amendment that simply seeks to ensure that there is the best possible LSIP. If that is to happen, we need the best possible employers. We want employers with a record of treating disabled employees well.

There is another point that I raised with the Minister, and I hope he has had a chance to consider it again. The definition of “local”, and the difficulties of defining a geographical region, arose in Committee, and I have not yet seen any proposals explaining how that will be dealt with. To many Members, the definition must seem fairly obvious—why is it contentious that we do not know what constitutes a local region?—but, as I pointed out to the Minister, the local enterprise partnership in Hull is different from the local authority because it covers more than one region. It is different from some of the big employers such as the Humberside police and fire and rescue services, which are different from the chamber of commerce, which is different from the Ofsted regional body, which is different from the regional skills commissioner area, which is different from the new organisation proposed in the Government's White Paper—a board to look across the Humber at large businesses

and zero carbon, which has not even been created yet. All those bodies have slightly different geographies, so I am keen for the Minister to explain the definition of “local” in his local skills improvement plans.

Sarah Champion: I largely welcome the aims of this Bill to improve the quality and funding of post-16 education, but it will do little to tackle the major skills shortages in key sectors including health and social care, manufacturing and engineering. It introduces local skills improvement plans, which would be created by employer representative bodies to assess local skills needs and help shape the courses that further education providers should offer to fill those needs.

In principle, these measures are good, but the Bill is significantly weaker in its current form than it was on Second Reading, after it had been thoroughly improved by amendments voted for by the Lords. I was deeply disappointed that during Committee stage in the Commons, Conservative Members voted to reverse these changes, which would have hugely benefited students from all backgrounds. I urge the House to take this opportunity to support Labour's amendments, especially amendments 15 and 16.

Previously, the Bill would have retained funding for BTECs for at least four more years, ensured that no student would be deprived of the right to take two BTECs, and allowed students to keep their universal credit entitlement while studying. It would also have required LSIPs to be developed in partnership with local authorities and further education providers, rather than just by the employer representative bodies. Now all those sensible and valuable improvements to the Bill have been scrapped, and I urge the Minister to reconsider.

I am particularly outraged by the Government's plan to scrap funding for BTECs. BTECs make up the majority of level 3 qualifications in this country, with nearly a quarter of a million young people taking at least one last year. For many young people, they are the most effective pathway to higher education or skilled employment. My hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) has made the important point that last year 230,000 students took a level 3 BTEC. It is the Government's goal that in four years' time only 100,000 students will be taking T-levels, which are the proposed replacement. Even if they achieve this, that could leave a gap of 130,000 students who will not be working towards an equivalent qualification if BTECs are no longer funded.

Who will be most affected by these changes? The Government's impact assessment acknowledges that students with special educational needs and students from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately represented on courses that risk losing funding. Some might be unable to achieve a level 3 qualification if these plans go ahead, so again I urge the Minister to reconsider. Research published by the Social Market Foundation in 2018 showed that students accepted to university from working-class and minority ethnic backgrounds are more likely to hold a BTEC qualification than their peers. Is this retrograde step really what the Government would consider to be levelling up?

I was proud to work with Natspec in tabling a series of amendments that would have strengthened the provision of LSIPs for students with special educational needs and disabilities. Some 21% of all students in general

[Sarah Champion]

further education colleges have a learning difficulty or disability, and the figure rises to 26% among 16 to 18-year-olds. There is no mechanism in the Bill to encourage or require employers to use local skills improvement plans to help address the disability employment gap, which stands at nearly 30%.

My amendments would have required the LSIPs to include positive actions to improve the employment prospects of disabled people, and required members of employment representative bodies to demonstrate a commitment to equality and diversity, so that they can create an inclusive plan for all, especially disabled people. These amendments were debated in Committee, and though I regret that the Government did not agree to put these conditions in the Bill, I am pleased that the Minister gave assurances that these key requirements would be in statutory guidance. I thank the Minister for that, and I ask him to confirm his commitment to working with organisations such as Natspec and the Association of Colleges on the guidance to make it as effective as possible.

Disability employment and the needs of young people with SEND should not be thought of separately, or as an issue that will relate only to forthcoming SEND Green Paper. They must be integral to the Government's plan for further education, and to addressing the nation's skills needs.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. It was a pleasure to serve as a member of the Bill Committee on this important piece of legislation. I support all the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), but I want to focus my comments on amendments 14 and 15. However, I think it is also right to mention new clause 13, tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), relating to sharia-compliant lifelong learning loans—something that is very important for many of my constituents.

8.30 pm

A local skills improvement plan that brings together public and private sector employers, further education colleges, independent training providers and those with democratic accountability, such as councils, would create a solid foundation for a skills strategy that covers all the relevant bases. In recognising the strength of such a holistic approach, I believe amendment 14 is incredibly necessary. Under the proposed legislation, employer representative bodies are empowered to lead on the development of local skills improvement plans, but local authorities, mayoral combined authorities and local colleges would be excluded.

Amendment 14 would ensure that local authorities consented to the designation of an ERB by the Secretary of State, a check that would ensure that ERBs were truly representative of the areas they covered, as well as reflecting local authorities' responsibility to promote and improve economic, social and environmental wellbeing. In my patch, Luton Council has a close working relationship with local employers, helping to shape the skills agenda. A purely centralised approach in which the Secretary of

State designates an eligible body as the ERB will undermine its relationship with local authorities, employers and residents, so I urge the Minister to support this important amendment.

We should consider the overarching direction of local skills plans, and qualifications must meet the ambitions of young people and the needs of employers. Four in 10 young people leave education without the level 3—A-level or BTEC—qualifications that are essential to the modern economy. That is a shocking indictment of this Government's record. To tackle the skills shortage, we need to protect students' access to a choice of qualifications that reflect their aspirations and preferred methods of learning and assessment. Young people in England can choose between three types of level 3 qualifications: academic routes such as A-levels; technical qualifications that may lead to a specific occupation; and applied general qualifications such as BTECs that combine the development of practical skills with academic learning.

Amendment 15 aims to prevent the Government from withdrawing support for established level 3 courses, including BTECs, for four years. Replacing the three-route model with a twin-track system of A-levels and T-levels will further weaken attempts to tackle the skills shortage. T-levels are largely untried and untested. They have been operational for only a year, and they are currently studied by only about 1,500 students. T-levels offer a narrow range of qualifications. By September 2023, school leavers will be able to take T-levels in 25 subjects, whereas there are more than 2,000 BTEC qualifications across 16 diverse sectors.

A-levels, T-levels and BTECs can co-exist. This does not need to be a zero-sum decision. They offer different methods of learning and different types of qualifications. The Protect Student Choice campaign is a coalition of 15 organisations representing staff and students in schools, colleges and universities. It has expressed concern that more than 250,000 students would be affected by this decision. The Department's own equalities impact assessment has stated that

“those from SEND backgrounds, Asian ethnic groups, disadvantaged backgrounds and males”

are

“disproportionately likely to be affected”.

It is crystal clear that the Government's reforms will level down the opportunities afforded to our young people. Withdrawing support demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of what young people need from their education to fulfil their career ambitions.

As a governor of Luton Sixth Form College, I have seen at first hand how BTECs change the lives of young people by offering them an avenue to a good university or employment. On a recent visit, I was thoroughly impressed by the young people studying on a BTEC course who were running a live broadcast studio. Someone was the host; there were guests; and there was a floor manager, a sound technician and a producer. That provides real practical skills that will feed into a future career in media or production in the creative sector, which contributes over £100 million to our economy annually and which is a key export to the world, contributing to our global influence. We cannot allow the Government to narrow opportunities and undermine social mobility in towns such as Luton.

Mr Perkins: My hon. Friend makes a strong point about the vocational nature of BTECs. I recently went to Derby College, and I saw five times more students doing BTECs than the equivalent T-level courses. It would be great if, ultimately, T-levels proved themselves and students moved towards choosing them, but does she agree that, while such small numbers are doing T-levels, it would be a huge mistake to shut the path to BTECs in favour of something that is largely unproven?

Rachel Hopkins: My hon. Friend makes an important point with which I thoroughly agree.

Our creative sector is a key export to the world and is part of our global influence. Why should young people in Luton not have the ability to train in these areas? They will not necessarily be able to follow a T-level in this subject area, so I totally agree with my hon. Friend.

I hope the Minister will accept Opposition amendment 15 to prevent the defunding of many successful and much-needed level 3 BTECs.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Further education should be about creating a workforce that meets the needs of our national and local economies. It should be about lifelong learning that gives everyone the power to follow the path that best suits them. It should especially be at the front and centre of our covid recovery and, last but not least, it should help us with the transition to net zero.

There was plenty of room to improve this Bill when it was introduced, and there still is. I regret that, so far, the Government seem to be missing this opportunity, but it is never too late. I favour new clause 4, which would require the Secretary of State to introduce a green skills strategy for higher, further and technical education. There is a key opportunity for further education in our effort to reach net zero, but less than 1% of college students are on a course with broad coverage of climate education. I commend the work of the excellent Bath College, which is already making strides to embed climate education in its curriculum, but the Government should step up, too.

We all know how important it is to manage the transition to net zero, which brings me to new clauses 14 and 15 and amendment 11 tabled by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). The offshore training regime is a barrier to offshore oil and gas workers transitioning their skills into the renewables sector. A new offshore training scheme is needed to facilitate cross-sector recognition of core skills and training in the offshore energy sector and to provide a retraining guarantee for oil and gas workers who wish to transition to careers in the green energy sector. What a missed opportunity it would be if we did not help people working in such industries, which will soon no longer be in place, to transition to a career in industries such as the renewables sector.

The Government say this Bill will transform opportunities for all, so why have they reversed changes that could significantly improve the accessibility and flexibility of qualifications—we have heard some powerful contributions on this—especially those aimed at learners with special educational needs and disabilities? Over a quarter of all 16 to 18-year-olds in further education have a learning difficulty or a disability, and I pay tribute to Project SEARCH, a partnership run by Bath and North East Somerset Council, Bath College and Virgin Care.

Nationally, too, many disabled people face huge difficulties in accessing employment after leaving school. Our disability employment gap stands at 30%. I therefore add my support to amendment 16, which would require local skills improvement plans to list specific strategies to help into employment those learners who have or have had an education, health and care plan. Again, this seems to be another missed opportunity to help those in society who face the biggest disadvantages to access employment, which is what they want. Whenever we talk to disability groups, what they want is employment; helping these groups into employment should be at the core of this Bill.

Although I will support the Bill on Third Reading, I am disappointed that the opportunity to transform further education has been so entirely missed.

Alex Burghart: With the leave of the House, I will speak to some of the amendments that have been discussed this evening. It has been a real pleasure to have been involved with this Bill on Second Reading, in Committee and on Report this evening. I feel the strength of feeling across the House for the skills agenda. This is an extraordinarily exciting time for skills, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) made clear. Never in my lifetime has there been such a hunger for skills in the economy, and that is a hunger that this Government will feed, because we are building a system in which qualifications, co-designed with employers, will give students the skills the economy needs. We will see good opportunities, allowing everyone to take a step forward in their life and career, and qualifications, backed by employers, that feed the needs of the economy.

In the time I have, I want to get through as many of the amendments as I can. First, I will address new clause 1, which stands in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow, the Chair of the Education Committee. I pay tribute to his fight for the cause of apprenticeships for prisoners; I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and Lord Chancellor made an announcement to this effect on 11 January, and I am happy to put on record that my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow was instrumental in driving this forward. We do not need to accept this new clause because we have seen that this can be done in secondary legislation, and that changes to primary legislation are not needed.

I turn to new clause 2, also tabled by my right hon. Friend, and to new clause 7, tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), who did sterling work when he was on the Front Bench. Those provisions both seek to place a level 3 entitlement on a statutory footing. The Government are delighted by the enthusiasm of Members on both sides of the House and in both Chambers for our free courses for jobs offer and the lifetime skills guarantee that the Prime Minister announced last April. As the House will know, it gives adults who do not have a level 3 qualification the opportunity to get a qualification in high-value subjects for free, regardless of age. That major step forward will transform life chances. We do not think it is right to put this offer into legislation; that would constrain the Government in how they allocate resources and make it more difficult to adapt the policy to changing circumstances, including for adults most in need. For example, only last November, the Secretary of State

[Alex Burghart]

announced that from this April, the offer will expand to include any adult in England who is unemployed or earns below the national living wage annually, regardless of their prior qualification level.

New clause 2 also includes a provision requiring any employer who receives apprenticeship funding to spend at least two thirds of that funding on people who begin apprenticeships at level 2 and 3 before the age of 25. We fully respect what the new clause is trying to do, but we point to the great progress we are already making on this score. In the first quarter of last year—the most recent one for which we have figures—62% of apprenticeship starts were for people under the age of 25, and level 2 and 3 apprenticeships accounted for 71% of all starts. That is wonderful stuff. Also, during the recent National Apprenticeship Week, I met a huge number of young and not-so-young people studying level 6 apprenticeships, which are making an enormous difference to their life, giving them huge opportunities in a way that is greatly respected by employers. I do not wish to see arbitrary levels fixed in legislation.

Amendment 12, tabled by the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), seeks to require a review of the operation of the apprenticeship levy, particularly at level 3 and below. We discussed this issue at some length in Committee. I reiterate that the Government have already radically reformed apprenticeships to put employers at their heart, increasing investment and improving quality. As I just said, we are starting to see major improvements at levels 2 and 3.

8.45 pm

Rather than review the levy, I want to focus on improvements that will make apprenticeships more relevant to employers in more sectors and more responsive to new and changing occupations. The Government have introduced the levy transfer and some companies are now transferring large sums of money—seven-figure sums—to small and medium-sized enterprises in their supply chains, to SMEs with which they may want to work in future and to SMEs with values they share. It is a wonderful opportunity.

Similarly, the Government have introduced flexi-job apprenticeships, which are more suitable for certain sectors, and front-loaded apprenticeships, which mean that students can spend their time in college at the start of their apprenticeships before spending the rest of their time in work.

I am afraid I simply do not recognise the remarks of those who say the apprenticeship levy has failed. The figures often quoted on the Opposition Benches in respect of the drop in apprenticeships do not take account of the radical reforms that we made to apprenticeships a few years ago. We now have apprenticeships of higher quality and starts are improving year on year.¹ The levy is a good thing for employers and for apprentices and we stand by the policy.

On the amendments relating to careers information, advice and guidance, we have long been determined to improve the quality of advice on non-academic options in schools so that young people can learn about the exciting progression opportunities that a technical education or apprenticeship can offer. That is why, through the Technical and Further Education Act 2017, the Government

introduced a new requirement for schools to provide opportunities for the providers of technical education and apprenticeships to visit schools to talk to all pupils in years 8 to 13. We are going further by putting into statute a minimum number in respect of those opportunities and setting parameters around their content. I reassure my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow that we are very much setting the floor of our ambitions, not the ceiling: we want to see schools go further.

If that is the push, I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the pull in which I am personally very interested. We recently announced, in the levelling-up White Paper, the creation of the unit for future skills, which we hope will present, over time, better data for students, providers, employers, the Government and those who draw up local skills improvement plans. We will be able to see where different choices lead people. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow, I know the data will show that there are wonderful opportunities for school leavers in apprenticeships and vocational qualifications at different levels. As the data shows that, we will expect schools to pay heed to the findings and encourage students to take up the opportunities. We do appreciate the push for which my hon. Friend is pushing and I am happy to talk to him further about that, but I want to see a pull over time and would like to discuss that with him, too.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood tabled amendments 8 and 7. Amendment 8 would require responsible authorities to ensure that the independent careers guidance provided to pupils in years 8 to 13 is provided by a person who is registered with the Career Development Institute who holds a level 4 qualification. I reassure my hon. Friend that the DFE statutory guidance to which schools must have regard already recommends that schools consult the UK Register of Career Development Professionals when they buy in a careers professional. Careers professionals on that register are required to be qualified to level 6—above the level 4 specified in the amendment.

Amendment 7 would require local authorities to have oversight of the independent careers guidance delivered in schools. The improvement of access to high-quality careers guidance is already driven locally by our network of careers hubs throughout the country. As members of the hubs, local authorities work in partnership with schools, colleges, employers and local enterprise partnerships to support, challenge and share good practice. We think that is the right role for local authorities to have.

Amendment 13, tabled by the hon. Member for Chesterfield, would require every local school to provide face-to-face careers guidance for every pupil and two weeks' worth of compulsory work experience for every registered pupil. I am proud to say that the 2019 employer skills survey estimated that in the 12 months before the survey—this is before covid—employers provided 782,000 placements for students in schools, more than half a million placements for students at college, and more than 400,000 placements for students at university. The careers statutory guidance makes it clear that schools and colleges should follow the Gatsby benchmarks and offer personal guidance and experiences of work as part of their careers strategy for all pupils. Every young person should have the opportunity to receive personal guidance from a careers professional whenever significant study or career choices are being made. The Gatsby

1. [Official Report, 28 February 2022, Vol. 709, c. 6MC.]

benchmarks require a personal guidance interview by the age of 16 and a further such interview at the age of 18. Personal guidance is the strongest performing benchmark. Some 80% of secondary schools report providing most students with an interview with a qualified careers adviser by the end of Year 11.

We want schools and colleges to follow the Gatsby benchmarks on careers guidance. These have been independently developed by experts based on the very best international practice. We want schools and colleges to have confidence in following the Gatsby benchmarks and that is what we will stick to.

On amendments relating to green skills and energy, new clause 4 from my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood seeks to introduce a requirement to develop a green skills strategy. I can reassure him that we are taking significant steps in this space already. Last year, the Department for Education established the sustainability and climate change unit to co-ordinate activity across the Department and the education sector.

Furthermore, at COP26, the Secretary of State launched the Department's draft sustainability and climate change strategy for the education and children's services systems. Action area 2 in that strategy specifically focuses on green skills and careers, as part of implementing the Government's net zero strategy. I would warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's contributions to the proposals in that strategy.

New clauses 14 and 15 and amendment 11 from the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) seek to introduce an energy skills strategy, and specifically a retraining guarantee for oil and gas workers looking to move into renewables. The Government are already taking steps in this space to support the labour market transition to net zero.

In March 2021, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy successfully negotiated and published the North sea transition deal. This places commitments on both the Government and the offshore oil and gas industry. I was particularly interested in the contribution of the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis). I can assure him that one of the commitments made in the North sea transition deal was to develop an integrated people and skills plan, led by OPITO, which is expected to be published shortly. It will assess the industry's future skills, training and standards requirements, and will set out how the industry will support and enable the transition of the workforce. The deal also places commitments on industry to ensure that the workforce's skills and competencies are mutually recognised across energy sectors to enable smoother job transferability.

New clause 5 from my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) seeks to require the Secretary of State to review universal credit conditionality, with a view to ensuring that claimants can retain their entitlement while undertaking education or training. As my hon. Friend knows from our conversations, an important principle of universal credit is that it does not duplicate the support provided by the student support system. However, there are significant exceptions to this already. First, this condition only applies to full-time training. Indeed, universal credit claimants are able to take on part-time training for any level of course as long as it meets their work-related requirements and their work coach is satisfied that it will help their employment chances.

Turning to full time training, DWP Train and Progress is an initiative aimed at increasing access to training opportunities for claimants. I was pleased to see that my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney referenced the flexibilities that already exist for access to our highly popular and successful bootcamps programme. This shows that the system is capable of flexibility. If, on his travels, which are many, he comes across any courses that he thinks the Government should be introducing flexibilities for, I am very happy to discuss them with him and then go and discuss them with my colleagues at DWP. However, in the very many conversations I have had with colleagues on both sides of the House about this, on no occasion has anyone presented me with a course for which they would like to see that additional flexibility. That is a challenge for all sides.

I turn now to new clauses 6, 8 and 10, tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood. I congratulate him on the publication of the Lifelong Education Commission report, which I read with interest. I believe his new clauses seek to introduce some of the recommendations in that report.

New clause 6 proposes that the Secretary of State publish an annual report on overall skills levels. We agree wholeheartedly with the need for data and analysis to inform our decision making. That is why in the "Levelling Up" White Paper we announced the creation of the Unit for Future Skills, which I mentioned earlier.

New clause 8 rightly points to the need to look at how we can better integrate academic and vocational education. The Government are already taking steps to do so through introducing a lifelong loan entitlement that will enable individuals to access funding for both further and higher education at levels 4 to 6.

New clause 10 raises the importance of re-skilling while in work and retraining for the jobs of the future. We know that that matters, which is why, through last year's spending review, the Government are delivering the biggest long-term settlement for post-16 education and skills in England since 2015, with an additional £3.8 billion over this Parliament by 2024-25.

It has been a great pleasure to take this Bill through Report and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

New clause 12 accordingly read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 14

RECOGNITION OF SKILLS IN THE ENERGY SECTOR

"(1) Within six months of the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must publish an Energy Sector Skills Strategy, for the purposes of—

- (a) achieving cross-sector recognition of core skills and training in the offshore energy sector, including the oil and gas sector, and the renewable energy sector; and
- (b) ensuring training and training standards bodies within the offshore energy sector adopt a transferable skills and competency-based approach to training.

(2) The strategy must target all workers, whether directly or indirectly (sub-contracted or agency) employed, or engaged through day-rate or self-employed contract models.

(3) When producing the strategy, the Secretary of State must consult with—

- (a) workers within the offshore energy sector;
- (b) unions within the offshore energy sector;
- (c) energy companies; and
- (d) training standards bodies relevant to the offshore energy sector.

(4) The Secretary of State must implement the strategy within 12 months of the passing of this Act. The Secretary of State may make regulations to provide for such elements of the strategy as require enactment through statutory provision.”—(*Caroline Lucas.*)

This new clause would facilitate cross-sector recognition of skills and training between the oil and gas sector and the renewable energy sector.

Brought up, and read the First time.

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

The House divided: Ayes 154, Noes 298.

Division No. 187]

[8.56 pm

AYES

Ali, Rushanara	Foxcroft, Vicky
Ali, Tahir	Foy, Mary Kelly
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Furniss, Gill
Amesbury, Mike	Gardiner, Barry
Anderson, Fleur	Gill, Preet Kaur
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Glindon, Mary
Barker, Paula	Green, Kate
Beckett, rh Margaret	Green, Sarah
Begum, Apsana	Greenwood, Lilian
Benn, rh Hilary	Greenwood, Margaret
Betts, Mr Clive	Griffith, Nia
Blake, Olivia	Gwynne, Andrew
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Haigh, Louise
Brennan, Kevin	Hardy, Emma
Bryant, Chris	Hayes, Helen
Buck, Ms Karen	Hillier, Dame Meg
Burgon, Richard	Hobhouse, Wera
Byrne, Ian	Hollern, Kate
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Hopkins, Rachel
Carden, Dan	Howarth, rh Sir George
Champion, Sarah	Jardine, Christine
Charalambous, Bambos	Jarvis, Dan
Clark, Feryal	Johnson, Kim
Cooper, rh Yvette	Jones, Darren
Creasy, Stella (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Cruddas, Jon	Jones, Sarah
Cummins, Judith	Kane, Mike
Daby, Janet	Keeley, Barbara
Davey, rh Ed	Kendall, Liz (<i>Proxy vote cast by Pat McFadden</i>)
David, Wayne	Khan, Afzal
Davies, Geraint	Kinnock, Stephen
De Cordova, Marsha	Kyle, Peter
Debbonaire, Thangam	Lammy, rh Mr David
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Lavery, Ian
Dodds, Anneliese	Leadbeater, Kim
Doughty, Stephen	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Dowd, Peter	Lewis, Clive
Eagle, Dame Angela	Long Bailey, Rebecca
Eagle, Maria	Lucas, Caroline
Efford, Clive	Lynch, Holly
Elliott, Julie	Madders, Justin
Elmore, Chris	Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Eshalomi, Florence	Malhotra, Seema
Esterson, Bill	Maskell, Rachael
Evans, Chris	McCarthy, Kerry
Farron, Tim	McDonagh, Siobhain
Farry, Stephen	McDonald, Andy
Fletcher, Colleen	McDonnell, rh John
Fovargue, Yvonne	McFadden, rh Mr Pat

McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Mishra, Navendu
Moran, Layla
Morgan, Helen
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Murray, James
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Olney, Sarah
Onwurah, Chi
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Osborne, Kate
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, rh Angela
Reed, Steve
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell

Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Slaughter, Andy
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Turner, Karl
Vaz, rh Valerie
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitley, Mick
Whittome, Nadia
Wilson, Munira
Winter, Beth
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

Jessica Morden and
Gerald Jones

NOES

Burns, rh Conor
Butler, Rob
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carter, Andy
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Theo
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Davison, Dehenna
Dines, Miss Sarah
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donelan, rh Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, rh Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard

Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Gray, James
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Kate
 Grundy, James
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, James
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil

Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, Julian
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 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
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 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
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richardson, Angela
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob

Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Trott, Laura
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
David T. C. Davies and
Michael Tomlinson

Question accordingly negated.

9.11 pm

Proceedings interrupted (Programme Order, 15 November 2021).

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

Clause 2

DESIGNATION OF EMPLOYER REPRESENTATIVE BODIES

Amendment proposed: 14, page 3, line 15, after “England” insert

“with the consent of the relevant local authority, Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and, where relevant, Mayoral Combined Authority”.—(*Mr Perkins.*)

This amendment provides for local authorities to give consent in the designation of employer representative bodies, to ensure employer representative bodies are representative of the areas they cover.

The House divided: Ayes 154, Noes 298.

Division No. 188]

[9.12 pm

AYES

Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur

Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary

Betts, Mr Clive
 Blake, Olivia
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, Ian
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Clark, Feryal
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Creasy, Stella (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cummins, Judith
 Daby, Janet
 Davey, rh Ed
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farron, Tim
 Farry, Stephen
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Green, Kate
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hardy, Emma
 Hayes, Helen
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz (*Proxy vote cast by Pat McFadden*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moran, Layla
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Turner, Karl
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 West, Catherine
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wilson, Munira

Winter, Beth
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

Adams, rh Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Anderson, Lee
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, Kemi
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, rh Conor
 Butler, Rob
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James

Jessica Morden and
 Gerald Jones

NOES

Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Dorries, rh Ms Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Gray, James
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Kate
 Grundy, James
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris

Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, Gillian
Knight, Julian
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Logan, Mark
Longhi, Marco
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Karl
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Milling, rh Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien

Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morrissey, Joy
Mortimer, Jill
Morton, Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
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
Pritchard, rh Mark
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Richardson, Angela
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Rutley, David
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Simmonds, David
Skidmore, rh Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stevenson, Jane
Stevenson, John
Stewart, rh Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Sir Gary
Sturdy, Julian
Sunderland, James
Swaine, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tomlinson, Justin
Trott, Laura
Vara, Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Villiers, rh Theresa

Walker, Mr Robin
Wallis, Dr Jamie
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wild, James

Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
David T. C. Davies and
Michael Tomlinson

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 14

INFORMATION ABOUT TECHNICAL EDUCATION AND
TRAINING: ACCESS TO ENGLISH SCHOOLS

Amendment proposed: 13, page 18, line 5, at end
insert—

“(aa) ensure that each registered pupil receives two weeks’
worth of compulsory work experience,

(ab) ensure that each registered pupil receives face to face
careers guidance, and”—(*Mr Perkins.*)

*This amendment would require every school to provide face to face
careers guidance for every pupil and two weeks’ worth of compulsory
work experience for every registered pupil.*

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 158, Noes 291.

Division No. 189]

[9.24 pm

AYES

Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Fleur
Ashworth, rh Jonathan
Barker, Paula
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begum, Apsana
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blake, Olivia
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Clark, Feryal
Cooper, rh Yvette
Creasy, Stella (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Cruddas, Jon
Cummins, Judith
Daby, Janet
Davey, rh Ed
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Cordova, Marsha
Debbonaire, Thangam

Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, Maria
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Farry, Stephen
Fletcher, Colleen
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gill, Preet Kaur
Girvan, Paul
Glendon, Mary
Green, Kate
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hardy, Emma
Hayes, Helen
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Rachel

Howarth, rh Sir George
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Darren
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz (*Proxy vote cast
by Pat McFadden*)
Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Leadbeater, Kim
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Mishra, Navendu
Moran, Layla
Morgan, Helen
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Murray, James
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Olney, Sarah
Onwurah, Chi

Oppong-Asare, Abena
Osborne, Kate
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, rh Angela
Reed, Steve
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Slaughter, Andy
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Turner, Karl
Vaz, rh Valerie
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitley, Mick
Whittome, Nadia
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Winter, Beth
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
**Jessica Morden and
Gerald Jones**

NOES

Adams, rh Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Anderson, Lee
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Badenoch, Kemi
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, Mr Steve
Barclay, rh Steve
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott

Beresford, Sir Paul
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Braverman, rh Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, rh Conor
Butler, Rob
Carter, Andy
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William

Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Theo
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davison, Dehenna
Dines, Miss Sarah
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donelan, rh Michelle
Dorries, rh Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, rh Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Peter
Glen, John
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Gray, James
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Kate
Grundy, James
Halfon, rh Robert

Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenkyins, Andrea
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, Gillian
Knight, Julian
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Logan, Mark
Longhi, Marco
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Karl

McPartland, Stephen	Selous, Andrew
Menzies, Mark	Shapps, rh Grant
Mercer, Johnny	Simmonds, David
Merriman, Huw	Skidmore, rh Chris
Metcalfe, Stephen	Smith, Chloe
Millar, Robin	Smith, Greg
Milling, rh Amanda	Smith, Henry
Mills, Nigel	Smith, rh Julian
Mohindra, Mr Gagan	Solloway, Amanda
Moore, Damien	Spencer, Dr Ben
Moore, Robbie	Spencer, rh Mark
Mordaunt, rh Penny	Stafford, Alexander
Morris, David	Stevenson, Jane
Morris, James	Stevenson, John
Morrissey, Joy	Stewart, rh Bob
Mortimer, Jill	Stewart, Iain
Morton, Wendy	Streeter, Sir Gary
Mullan, Dr Kieran	Stride, rh Mel
Mumby-Croft, Holly	Sturdy, Julian
Mundell, rh David	Sunderland, James
Murray, Mrs Sheryll	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Neill, Sir Robert	Syms, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia	Throup, Maggie
Nokes, rh Caroline	Timpson, Edward
Norman, rh Jesse	Tomlinson, Justin
O'Brien, Neil	Trott, Laura
Opperman, Guy	Vara, Shailesh
Parish, Neil	Vickers, Martin
Pawsey, Mark	Vickers, Matt
Penning, rh Sir Mike	Villiers, rh Theresa
Penrose, John	Walker, Mr Robin
Percy, Andrew	Wallis, Dr Jamie
Philp, Chris	Warburton, David
Pincher, rh Christopher	Warman, Matt
Poulter, Dr Dan	Watling, Giles
Pow, Rebecca	Webb, Suzanne
Prentis, Victoria	Whately, Helen
Pritchard, rh Mark	Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Quince, Will	Whittaker, Craig
Raab, rh Dominic	Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Randall, Tom	Wiggin, Sir Bill
Redwood, rh John	Wild, James
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob	Williams, Craig
Richardson, Angela	Williamson, rh Gavin
Robinson, Mary	Wood, Mike
Rosindell, Andrew	Wragg, Mr William
Ross, Douglas	Wright, rh Jeremy
Rowley, Lee	Young, Jacob
Russell, Dean	Zahawi, rh Nadhim
Rutley, David	
Saxby, Selaine	
Scully, Paul	

Tellers for the Noes:
David T. C. Davies and
Michael Tomlinson

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 35

COMMENCEMENT

Amendment made: 9, page 40, line 31, leave out “and 23 to” and insert “, 23 to (*Office for Students: publication and protection from defamation*) and”.—(*Alex Burghart.*)

This amendment brings NC12 into force two months after Royal Assent.

Title

Amendment made: 10, line 5 after “assessments” insert “and publication of certain matters”.—(*Alex Burghart.*)

This amendment amends the Long Title to cover NC12.

Third Reading

9.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi):
I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

One year ago, the Government published their White Paper titled “Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth”. We set out our ambition to deliver landmark reforms to post-16 education and training. For too long, this sector has not received the attention it deserves. We do not have enough people with the skills needed for important sectors such as engineering—one that is close to my heart—and health and social care. In many ways, that has held back our economy and prevented people from fulfilling their potential.

We must continue on our road to recovery as a nation from the coronavirus pandemic and transition it to endemic, as we witnessed today with the Prime Minister’s statement to the House. We also need to adapt our economy and society to meet our commitment to net zero by 2050 and maintain our global leadership on climate change following COP26, with all the opportunities that there are in those new and emerging sectors for the economy.

I am glad to say that our economy is in a strong position to respond to these challenges, with the highest growth rate in the G7. On jobs, we have a record 1.2 million vacancies to fill; that is 59%—almost 60%—higher than pre-pandemic levels. Unemployment is falling and is now just 4.1%, and youth unemployment, especially, is at a record low.

As Education Secretary, and in my previous roles on the vaccine roll-out and as a Business Minister, I have met countless employers who tell me about the progress that their businesses could make if they could only hire people with the right skills. I have also met young people and adults whose lives have been transformed because they had the chance to upskill or learn a new trade. That is why I am so focused on—some will say obsessed with—delivering an ambitious skills agenda to transform the prospects of people up and down our great country.

Higher skills lead to higher productivity, which in turn leads to higher wages, ensuring that we remain globally competitive and creating the economic growth—that dynamic economy—needed to pay for our world-class public services. As part of that, we are quadrupling places on skills bootcamps, with intensive courses from coding to construction. Recent data shows that more than 54% of the 2,210 adults who completed skills bootcamps went on to secure a new role or a promotion. Apprenticeships have bounced back to pre-pandemic levels, with more than 130,200 apprenticeship starts between August and October last year. We are delivering the roll-out of T-levels, with a plan for up to 100,000 T-level entrants by the end of the spending review period, supported by our £3.8 billion investment in skills over this Parliament.

The Bill and our wider skills reforms are our opportunity to tackle the challenges and unlock the full potential of our people and the productivity of our economy. We have heard how the Bill will deliver essential reform to further education and skills in our country. Today, we are taking a significant step towards that goal.

[*Nadhim Zahawi*]

For learners, the Bill will provide much-needed flexibility. I have seen for myself the flexi-job apprenticeships at the brilliant Pinewood Studios, which is making the films of the future. We are enabling people to study or retrain at any stage of their life with the reassurance that the skills they gain hold genuine currency with employers in their area. As many right hon. and hon. Members have said today, we want to see greater parity between further and higher education, no longer pushing students towards a one-size-fits-all, three-year, full-time degree.

For employers, the Bill will solidify and anchor their critical position at the heart of the skills system and give them a vital role in shaping local skills provision in partnership with providers. That will ensure that post-16 education and training is directly aligned to the skills that employers actually need to grow, now and in future, and will help employers to get the skilled workforce that they need to compete internationally.

For the FE sector, the Bill will increase confidence in the standard of qualifications, thanks to a package of measures that will help to drive up quality standards across the technical education system. In taking forward the Bill, we recognise the huge importance of the FE sector to our economy and society and its role in upskilling our workforce and creating access to opportunities, no matter someone's background.

Alongside our wider skills reforms, the Bill will deliver on our plans to level up across the country. People will be able to get the quality education and training that they need for work at any stage of their lives in all communities across the country, ending the perception that the only way to get on in life is by moving to London or another big city. From 2025, our lifetime loan entitlement will give people access to loan funding to gain qualifications at levels 4 to 6, whether they are an 18-year-old leaver from Bradford, a 40-year-old career changer from Plymouth or a parent in Newcastle looking to return to paid work after a career break.¹

We want our reforms to work for everyone. Several colleagues spoke about learners with special educational needs and disabilities, who make up a significant proportion of our student population; looking ahead, they will be supported by the publication of our SEND review. Pupils in schools, when thinking about their future choices, will have access to high-quality careers advice to help them to decide the best route for them—I heard the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) about his new clause 3. FE teachers will be supported through high-quality initial teacher training that helps them to deliver excellent skills provision. That is what the Bill delivers.

I thank hon. Members across the House for their contributions over the past few months. I believe that the Bill will leave this place in a much improved state, with amendments that have enabled us to fine-tune the measures in it and make it much stronger. The debate on technical qualifications has been particularly passionate and robust. I hope Members will be reassured that measures in the Bill will improve the quality of such qualifications for all learners, whatever their background or career ambitions. We have listened to concerns about qualifications reform. That is why, on Second Reading,

I announced an extra year before the implementation of our reform timetable to allow more time for all involved to prepare for the changes.

The Minister for apprenticeships and skills, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), has led the Bill through its passage with great dedication, and has spoken passionately at each of its stages. My predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson), had the vision to bring forward this transformational Bill; he could never have done it without my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) by his side, and I know that skills and further education remain an area of great personal commitment for her and for him. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), the Chair of the Education Committee, for his support for the Bill. He has raised many important issues, tonight and every night, including skills and training for prisoners. I hope that he is reassured by my words today, and by our clear commitment to making apprenticeships available to prisoners.

My thanks also go to the Whips; to my Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston); and, of course, to my officials, who have worked so hard and have been so dedicated to the delivery of the Bill. As for the Opposition, the hon. Members for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) and for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) have engaged constructively at every stage of the Bill, and I am grateful to them both for their work in challenging us to ensure that it was the very best it could be.

I am also grateful to the Committee for its work in scrutinising the Bill, and I am indebted to my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) for chairing it. I pay tribute to my hon. Friends on the Committee: my hon. Friends the Members for Great Grimsby (Lia Nici), for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), for Warrington South (Andy Carter), for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith), for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) and for Guildford (Angela Richardson), all of whom brought considerable experience and expertise in further education, which benefited the Bill enormously.

I am, of course, hugely grateful to noble Lords for their contributions in the other place. The issues that they raised have helped us to improve the Bill, but I hope they will understand why it was not the right place for all their amendments. Finally, I thank the Clerks and officials for their diligent work in supporting the Bill's passage through Parliament. It is an honour to lead the great Department that is delivering this transformational Bill. I look forward to the benefits that it will bring for learners, employers and the economy, and I commend it to the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I note that two Back Benchers wish to speak, and I am sure that the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman will bear that in mind. We do have to finish at 10 pm.

9.47 pm

Mr Perkins: I will certainly ensure that there is time for the voices of other Members to be heard, Madam Deputy Speaker.

1. [Official Report, 28 February 2022, Vol. 709, c. 6MC.]

Let me first thank the Secretary of State for what he has just said, and for being here for the Bill's Third Reading. He appears to be wearing an ostentatiously large "Truss for Leader" badge. I do not know whether that is a scoop or not, but he is certainly very welcome. [HON. MEMBERS: "It stands for 'T-levels'."] In that case, I apologise. I misrepresented the right hon. Gentleman, and I am happy to set the record straight. We have heard today that 5,000 people are taking T-levels this year; I have no idea whether there are more or fewer in the "Truss for Leader" camp, but at least I have been able to clarify the meaning of the Secretary of State's badge.

I repeat the right hon. Gentleman's thanks to everyone who served on the Public Bill Committee. We heard some excellent contributions from Members on both sides of the Committee, and we have heard some powerful contributions today. That should give all of us confidence that there are many people in this place who recognise how critical the further education and skills agenda is. There is a shared passion, throughout this place, for ensuring that we offer better opportunities to a whole generation of younger people. We recognise the importance of the sector, and the fantastic contribution played by so many professionals in it, as well as their commitment to ensuring that that new generation have the opportunities that they deserve. I think there is agreement on, at least, the importance of that agenda.

I have to take issue with what the Secretary of State said about the Bill leaving this House stronger than it was when it arrived from another place. Amendments were tabled there by people with tremendous experience, including a whole raft of former Education Secretaries and a number of other people with real commitment to the sector, and we felt that those amendments would have greatly strengthened the Bill. That view was shared by the Association of Colleges and many other contributors to the debate. It is a matter of tremendous regret that those amendments were removed by the Government and that the very sensible amendments that were proposed tonight were either voted against or not put to a vote. That is a regrettable step. The Secretary of State speaks about his obsession and passion for getting this right. We have heard from his colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), that in many of the areas that we were pushing, the Government agreed with the principle of what we were saying but felt it unnecessary for our proposals to be put in the Bill.

Throughout my 12 years in this place, we have had a raft of reforms from the Government, and have often heard the same sort of rhetoric. I mentioned at some length in my speech that employers are being put in the driving seat. That has been the stated aim of every reform from this Government over 11 years. We have heard about schools knowing their pupils best, and about schools being the best placed to ensure that careers guidance and work experience are delivered, yet throughout those 11 years we have seen the failings of that approach, which is why we believe that getting some of these things into the Bill and into statute is a matter of real value. I will not repeat the contributions that I made in Committee and in this debate, but I would reinforce to Members in the other place that we Labour Members believe that there was a lot of merit in their amendments, and we will continue to push for the values that were outlined in them, even though we were unable to win the votes tonight.

I thank the Bill Committee, and all those in the Public Bill Office for the substantial support they gave us on the huge number of amendments that we tabled. I also thank Lindsey Kell in my office for the huge amount of work that she has done in supporting me on this Bill. Unlike those on the Treasury Benches, we do not have an army of civil servants, but we have been very well advised and supported. I thank all those organisations in the sector that have engaged with us and supported our amendments with evidence. They have been incredibly helpful in enabling the Opposition to do our job of holding the Government to account, suggesting a better direction of travel, and outlining how a Labour Government would approach these matters differently. I recognise that other hon. Members would like to contribute, so I simply thank all those involved in getting the Bill to this stage. I look forward to continuing these debates in the future.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I would recommend about three minutes each for the remaining speakers.

9.53 pm

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): One of the pillars of this Government's agenda is, rightly, levelling up. The recently published levelling up White Paper lays the blueprint for it; it sets out a plan to improve lives and expand opportunities across the whole country, particularly in mission 6, which involves skills. Skills are particularly important for the east midlands, as we have unfortunately seen a trend of people entering low-paid jobs and remaining in them. That is highlighted by the White Paper, which has identified that the east midlands has the second highest proportion—20.1%—of low-paid jobs in the country. We have already taken steps to try to break this cycle in Loughborough; we used advanced town deal funding to establish a careers and enterprise hub that is delivering apprenticeships, traineeships, the lifetime skills guarantee, life skills, work coaches and youth workers from Jobcentre Plus, who will support people of all ages in upskilling and reskilling. This comes alongside the Government-funded T-level centre at Loughborough College—thank you very much—and the new £13 million institute of technology at Loughborough University, Derby College and Derby University. Again, thank you very much.

Taken together, these measures will not only help people to get ahead in life but will bridge the skills gap. The Bill puts employers at the very heart of the skills system to ensure that local businesses have access to a pool of local talent with the right skills. It enables employers and education providers to collaborate to ensure skills provision meets local need, and creates a new duty on further education providers to strengthen accountability and performance in this area. Loughborough already has that embedded in our education DNA, and it is a key driving force of business development in the constituency.

During the recess, I visited local businesses, which told me of their skills shortages. The Bill will not only enable us to identify immediate needs and trends, but will offer an opportunity for businesses to highlight their future plans for growth and the pipeline for recruitment, so that careers, skills and training can be matched to opportunities and will lead directly to jobs.

[Jane Hunt]

The Bill will provide a clear pathway into skilled employment for everyone—not just those with a university degree, as has historically been the case—and I am delighted to speak in support of it this evening.

9.56 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I am grateful for the chance to sneak in during the last few minutes of this debate. It is always right that Mansfield should have the last word on such subjects, so I will take full advantage.

I warmly welcome this Bill, and it was a privilege to sit on the Committee with the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), and to feel his passion and understanding of the subject, which is hugely important, as my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) just said, for the levelling-up agenda.

I was pleased to see skills and education investment at the heart of last week's White Paper, because we need a long-term change in communities such as mine in Mansfield to make sure that people have better life chances. We are already seeing the benefits of that agenda. My hon. Friend pointed to examples in Loughborough, and I can point to further examples in Mansfield and North Notts.

Last year, the towns fund funded what we call the knowledge exchange of business innovation and growth. That will support local businesses in north Notts so that they can do things differently, automate, look to the future, grow and employ more people. There was also funding for robotics and automation in neighbouring Ashfield and similar funding for aviation and engineering in Newark. North Nottinghamshire has benefited greatly from £140 million-odd of investment through the towns fund, and a lot of it is going to skills and education, for which I am grateful.

I read in a briefing earlier this week that further education and technical skills contribute £26 billion to the economy. I have no idea how that was worked out, but it sounds like a very big number. Its importance should therefore be clear to all of us. Education is not just about getting a university degree and swanning off to work in whatever sector. I hear so often from employers that they take on first-class graduates with excellent qualifications on paper who simply are not equipped for the workplace. Other routes have to be built with employers, so that workers suit sectors such as engineering, where practical work experience and technical skills are so important. People cannot learn it all in a classroom, and this Bill helps us to deliver for the long term, with the kind of change that will build opportunities for people in constituencies like mine.

I welcome the lifetime skills guarantee and the finance that comes with it. In a post-covid era, more and more adults are finding that the sectors in which they work and the things for which they are qualified simply are not viable anymore. If we are to rebuild, grow and allow such people to get back into rewarding work in sectors that are growing—there are plenty of them—we must support them to retrain with the finance they need, and it needs to be flexible.

If I could make one plug, it would, as always, be for West Notts College and Nottingham Trent University—I could bang on about them forever. Edward Peck, the

vice-chancellor of NTU, has fantastic ideas about how we could pilot the lifelong learning loan, and how we could ensure it is flexible by allowing people to study units at individual organisations and transfer them around the country over their adult life, so that they continue to build their qualification and take it with them. It is important that it works flexibly, and I would love to have that conversation with any of my wonderful hon. and right hon. Friends on the Front Bench. The skills Minister is coming to talk to me and NTU tomorrow, for which I am grateful.

Partnerships with employers and universities are key to providing long-term opportunities for people in my constituency, young and old, who will benefit from the Bill long into the future. That is why I am delighted to support it today.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, with amendments.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This afternoon, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence made an important and statesmanlike statement on Ukraine. This evening, Mr Putin has recognised the two separatist regions in Ukraine as independent states, with dangerous parallels to Germany's recognition of the Sudetenland in 1938. In these circumstances, do you accept that it would be appropriate to have a further statement, as soon as possible, on the new Ukrainian situation? The Defence Secretary himself stated today that he would update us as necessary, and this may well be the reason for making such a statement tomorrow or as soon as possible.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. As he said, the Secretary of State did undertake to keep the House updated, and I am sure he will do so. The hon. Gentleman will also be aware that the House will be debating the sanctions regulations tomorrow. I also know that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the point that he has made.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 2 and 3 together.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (AGRICULTURE)

That the draft Waste and Agriculture (Legislative Functions) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 13 January, be approved.

IMMIGRATION

That the draft Immigration and Nationality (Fees) (Amendment) Order 2022, which was laid before this House on 12 January, be approved.—(Steve Double.)

Question agreed to.

Social Care: Nottinghamshire

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Steve Double.)

10.1 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is great to have the opportunity to raise the issue of social care in the Chamber, and I am grateful for the time from the Minister and from colleagues to engage with this really important issue. I would also like to thank the Government for finally taking the issue of social care reform seriously and coming forward with plans, which are long overdue.

Social care is absolutely key, not just in itself, but to the success of our wider health services. NHS backlogs could be prevented or reduced by investment in care, with hospital admissions prevented or timely discharges achieved by better integration between the two. For example, an emergency care package could be put in place in a timely way rather than having someone need an ambulance to accident and emergency. It is important therefore to ensure that the funds described as being “for social care”, from the national insurance increase, do make their way to care provision—to local authorities and providers—to improve support and capacity. I know that the Government have prioritised tackling hospital backlogs with the first year or so of that money, but care has backlogs too—in Nottinghamshire we have gone from a waiting list of zero to one of 400 over the course of the covid pandemic. As I have described, care services play a key part in tackling those backlogs in the health service. As ever, we often focus on hospitals, but I have always felt that primary care, community-based services and, of course, social care are by far and away the best and most cost-effective ways to tackle these issues and improve our wider health service provision.

That said, this White Paper and talk of improved integration between the two services is very welcome. I have already described how this is key to reducing pressure on hospitals, but the same applies for our ambulance services and GPs too, if people are able to be cared for effectively without calling on acute or emergency services. As the White Paper says, the current system can be complex and disjointed. The focus on community-based provision and improving healthy life expectancy is a good one, and I welcome the fact that it explicitly talks about support for working-age adults with disabilities, who are so often forgotten. The debate about social care in the public domain and in the media always seems to focus on elderly people, and of course that aspect is vital and really important to us all, but half of the provision of social care is actually for disabled, working-age adults with increasingly long-term and complex support needs, which are also increasingly expensive and unsustainable. That area certainly needs more focus, so I welcome the fact that it is included—

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): An integrated approach is needed for social care. Nottinghamshire’s social care needs are not the same as those of any other county, so does my hon. Friend agree that a communities-based approach is needed, as is precisely laid out in the social care White Paper?

Ben Bradley: My hon. Friend knows the challenges in Nottinghamshire social care as well as anybody—I am sure they come across his desk in Broxtowe all the time—and he is right that this work has to be locally led. I welcome the opportunity in the White Paper to

build from the community upwards through our integrated care strategy and to work together with health partners around the county. In the long term, locally led and community-based provision will help us to tackle the challenges we face.

This debate is on social care in Notts. As the Minister knows, among those in this place I am unique in being responsible for the direct delivery of social care services in my county and in my Mansfield constituency, so this is a unique opportunity for me to raise the key issues that affect those services with her and with the Government—from the coalface, so to speak. That is part of why I have argued that my dual role can benefit my constituents and the Government. I hope that proves to be true.

The Minister will not be surprised to hear that workforce capacity is far and away the biggest challenge that we face in Nottinghamshire. We have seen a further 5% decline in staffing levels in a sector that was already understaffed. I am grateful that a crisis was averted by the revocation of the mandatory vaccination plans, because they would have seen thousands more leave the sector in Notts. That change of policy was absolutely the right decision.

We estimate that the turnover of staff in home care is around 26%, which is a massive and ridiculous proportion. That reflects the fact that there is significant competition for pay; that people can earn more in other sectors locally; that we are struggling to recruit; and that staff who have been through the ringer in recent years in incredibly tough circumstances are increasingly deciding to retire early or take a break because of the pressures.

We are doing a lot locally to try to combat the amount of turnover, including through new apprenticeships and big recruitment campaigns with market providers, and by incentivising collaboration between providers and offering incentives for them to invest in staff wellbeing or training, but more is needed. We need a national workforce strategy and recovery plan with sustainable funding that recognises the disparities in pay and conditions in the sector, and that needs to be part of the “fair price for care” reforms, which is not currently the case.

We need to understand what more can be done to increase the stature and status of care workers and the care profession. The workforce plan needs to include clear and defined pathways into health services, so that people see social care as an entry pathway to wider health and NHS careers, where the range and scale of opportunities for different jobs and long-term careers is massive. Care is often perceived to be a low-skilled, low-paid job with little scope for progress or promotion, but that is absolutely mad when we consider the fact that the skills and qualifications are directly transferable into one of the world’s biggest employers, the NHS, which covers every health role under the sun.

The pathways should be obvious and we need to make them obvious and overtly available to care workers and young people in schools and colleges. I hope we can plan some of this work locally, perhaps through the devolution of skills funding in the coming years. We are already working on some of that with West Nottinghamshire College and Nottingham Trent University, which are trying to build the pathways from school directly into the health services in my Mansfield constituency. A national pathway for integrated health and care careers would be fantastic.

[Ben Bradley]

The shortage in home care has meant that an additional 10 people a day are waiting to be discharged from my local hospital and much higher proportions of people end up being discharged to care homes when they could and should have gone to their own home. That is not good for long-term outcomes or those people's wellbeing and also means that our reablement services—those that support people to get back on their feet and be independent in their own home—are overwhelmed. These are observations from Notts, but the trend is regional and national, not just ours. In fact, we have fared better than many other areas.

I thank the incredibly hard-working and dedicated staff in Nottinghamshire's social care services for everything they have done to manage incredibly difficult circumstances. I include among them our council's service director, Melanie Brooks, who directly delivered care packages and was on call over Christmas to try to mitigate the pressure. A huge thank you to her and her teams.

We have a lack of housing stock for care provision, and investment in things such as supported accommodation has slowed down, obstructed by covid, construction and supply chain issues and other factors. It often seems like the link between health and housing is not made clear, and it does not seem to feature much in some of the recent proposed legislation, but good housing can reduce social care needs, prevent hospital admissions and support people to remain active and sociable in their own homes and communities.

Homes England funding could be devolved to support local areas to meet their needs. Housing needs to be a key part of care reform. In our two-tier area we are working hard on collaboration among councils and providers to ensure that housing and health services talk to each other, but that is an option rather than something that is automatically built into the system. That needs to change. Similarly, if we have accountable local leaders—the Government have made clear through the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities their intention to devolve significant powers—could we not have more local control over how powers are managed and delivered? That would help us to integrate our local services. Children's services are also key to this. I question whether all this needs to be linked to the children's care work that seems to be in the pipeline, through the Josh MacAlister review and the special educational needs and disability review that is happening in the Department for Education. Children's care services and adult care services are linked, quite clearly, and they need to be integrated just as health and care do. I know that this is complex as it spans multiple departments, but it is also sensible and it needs to happen.

Our local integrated care systems will seek to draw all these things together to offer the best start in life and the right preventive interventions, just as Nottinghamshire County Council is doing with a significant investment in the transformation of our children's services. More proactive and preventive services will be announced in our budget on Thursday. That is something of which I am incredibly proud and it will, I think, change lives. If local plans across the country seek to integrate adult care services and children's care services then, clearly, national ones must do so, too.

Financially, Nottinghamshire has some capacity to use adult social care precepts this year, but continued rises in council tax without major reform are also unsustainable, especially when we consider that some London boroughs pay half the council tax that many people do elsewhere, including in my own constituency. That is not fair, but, as an authority, it means that we do have some funds to draw on this year. Our social care budget for 2022-23 will rise by around £12 million compared with last year. That extra funding is very welcome, but, again, we need to understand that that is not sustainable in the current system. Fairer funding for local government needs to be a priority to make sure that we have that level playing field across the country.

There will be a significant challenge in terms of resources and staffing capacity as we try to tackle both the day-to-day care issues that I have touched on—pressures of services and staffing—as well as delivering the significant reform that we are being asked to deliver. Although it is welcome and right, it will present its own challenges and pressures. The Government must ensure that sufficient capacity exists if they want us to do both at the same time.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this Adjournment debate; it is on a very important subject. I am sure that most Nottinghamshire MPs have spoken to people such as Terry Galloway who has some very interesting ideas on this subject. I am talking in particular about people who are of working age but who are leaving the care system—reintegrating into life as it were. They face particular challenges that are almost akin to a benefits trap in terms of leaving care and then having to meet certain costs. Does he agree that, when we talk about resources, it is important that we give these people the resources that they need to bridge that gap? In the longer term, that will benefit both them and the wider system as it will help them to get back to a normal life.

Ben Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Terry Galloway is fantastic. He is a real advocate for some of our children's services—our care leavers' services in particular—in Nottinghamshire. I am pleased that my hon. Friend has raised his case here today. This is a prime example of where children's services and adult care services need to talk to each other, and where we need to have those clear pathways into additional support. Some of those children will get support until they are 25 under the current system, but that is not all funded. Equally, we need to do more at a county level to plan for the lifetime of these children. We know that they are there. We know that when they are in children's services, they are likely to come into adult services, and we need to make sure that we are planning for that in the long term. The same applies to SEND and other local challenges—my hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. We know that the outcomes for care leavers are not great, which is partly why we are investing £14 million over the next three years at County Hall in transforming those proactive and preventive services, starting with our children's services, making sure that we are delivering the best possible support and offer to them.

I am pleased that the Government are finally grasping the nettle of social care reform and integration, because, just like the never-ending increases in the NHS budget,

it is neither right nor affordable for spending to go up and up every year and for that to be accepted by Government or by anyone else. That is not a solution. We must do it differently. If we cannot tackle the growth in cost and demand under the current systems, then those systems need to change—whether they be care services, health services, children's services, or all of it. In some ways, covid provides us with that opportunity to draw a line, to think again and to reform. I hope Government will take that opportunity, and I look forward to hearing from my hon. Friend the Minister.

10.13 pm

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) for securing this debate. I also thank him personally for his sterling work during the pandemic as Leader of Nottinghamshire County Council. He brings a unique insight to this debate as a result of being both a Member in this place and someone who works on the frontline dealing with the issues that I also have to wrestle with. I listen to him and very much appreciate all that he has to say.

I commend, too, the powerful contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Broxtowe (Darren Henry) and for Gedling (Tom Randall). As they said, the adult social care sector faces challenges in recruiting and retaining care staff. We recognise that, and we have put in place a range of measures, as I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield would recognise, to support local authorities and care providers in addressing those workforce pressures, including making available a total of £462.5 million in workforce recruitment and retention funds, and the latest phase of our national recruitment campaign, promoting the rewarding and stimulating roles in the adult social care sector. I am sure many hon. Members have seen the adverts now on TV.

The new workforce recruitment and retention funds can be invested in a number of measures to support staff and to boost staff retention within social care. They include, but are not limited to, occupational health, wellbeing measures and incentive and retention payments, and there is a lot of flexibility within that fund, which I am sure is appreciated. On 15 February 2022, we added care workers, care assistants and home carers to the health and care visa and the shortage occupations list for a 12-month period, which will make it quicker, cheaper and easier for social care employers to recruit eligible workers from overseas.

The Government are also providing a sustainable local government settlement, which is designed to ensure key pressures in the system are met, including the national living wage and national minimum wage. An increase in the rate of the national living wage will mean that many of the lowest-paid care workers will benefit from a 6.6% pay rise effective from 1 April 2022. We continue to monitor workforce capacity and the impact of our interventions through the Department's capacity tracker, workforce data and local intelligence, as well as monitoring the impact on unmet need and NHS discharge—and, of course, hearing from many hon. Members about what is happening on the ground locally.

Turning to our workforce strategy, in our "People at the Heart of Care" White Paper we committed to at least £500 million to develop and support the workforce

over the next three years. That is an important part of our wider investment to reform the social care system. The commitment includes developing a knowledge and skills framework, developing career pathways and linked investment to support progression within roles and across the wider sector for care workers and registered managers. That will help to ensure that staff feel recognised, rewarded and equipped with the right skills and knowledge, and that their health and wellbeing are supported.

Moving to the fair cost of care, we are committing £1.4 billion over the next three years to support local authorities in moving towards paying providers a fair cost of care. That will enable local authorities to ensure that local care markets can respond to the changes that reform will bring, and to address under-investment and poor workforce practices.

On funding, our focus has been on ensuring that the social care sector has the resources it needs to respond to covid-19. Throughout the pandemic, we have made available over £2.9 billion in funding for adult social care. Additionally, we provided £60 million for local authorities to support the adult social care response to covid-19 in January 2022 alone; since May 2020, we have provided over £50 million of specific funding to Nottinghamshire to support the adult social care sector in its response to covid-19. The most recent infection control and testing fund provided almost £400,000 of funding to Nottinghamshire to enable vaccination of social care staff.

My hon. Friend mentioned hospital discharge. To support safe and timely hospital discharge, we have made nearly £3.3 billion available via the NHS since March 2020. That includes an additional £478 million to continue hospital discharge programmes until March 2022.

I was delighted that my hon. Friend recognised the importance of housing in preventing social care needs from deteriorating and the link between housing and health. In our "People at the Heart of Care" White Paper we announced that we will launch a new investment in housing of at least £300 million over the next three years to connect housing with health and care and to drive the stock of new supported housing for adults of all ages. We have committed to continuing to incentivise the supply of supported housing through the care and support specialised housing—or CASSH—fund, with £213 million available over the next three years, which works out as £71 million a year.

Our integration White Paper is the next vital step in our journey of joining up health and social care at a local place-based level. Our proposals will help the system to recover from the pandemic. I know that Nottinghamshire has seen the introduction of End of Life Together—a collaboration of local hospices, community trusts, primary care providers and acute trusts that came together to deliver palliative care and end-of-life services. That was much needed in the local area and I am sure it has provided a lot of support to families at their time of need.

We have also focused on training and opportunities for the workforce across the system, and that will allow staff to get on with doing their jobs without organisational silos standing in the way. Both my hon. Friend and I very much hope that the integrated care systems will really help to deliver much better services locally.

[Gillian Keegan]

I thank my hon. Friend and all hon. Members for their contributions on this important topic today. I know that they are deeply committed to supporting the social care system and making sure that people get the support they need. I hope the actions I have set out today reassure them that the Government are working tirelessly to make that happen, and I look forward to continuing to work with them to make it happen in

Nottinghamshire. Finally, I take this opportunity to thank all those on the frontline providing care: people who go the extra mile, day in and day out, to make a vital difference to people's lives. I say thank you on behalf of all of us.

Question put and agreed to.

10.21 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 21 February 2022

[SIR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

Gender Recognition Act

[Relevant document: Third Report of the Women and Equalities Committee, Reform of the Gender Recognition Act, HC 977.]

4.30 pm

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind Members to observe social distancing and wear masks. I call Elliot Colburn to move the motion.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 327108, relating to reform of the Gender Recognition Act.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I would like to begin this debate, as I have begun every Petitions Committee debate that I have led, by going over the prayer of the petition before I make a few observations. Formally, on behalf of the Committee, I have moved the motion on the petition entitled “Reform the Gender Recognition Act”.

The prayer of the petition states,

“Reform the GRA to allow transgender people to self-identify without the need for a medical diagnosis, to streamline the administrative process, and to allow non-binary identities to be legally recognised. The response gathered by the government showed strong support for this reform with 70% in favour, but the results seem to have been ignored by policy makers. The current process is distressing and often humiliating for transgender people, as well as lengthy and costly making it inaccessible to many people. Reform is needed to improve the lives of trans people, and I don’t think the proposed measures will negatively impact existing provisions under the Equalities Act.”

The petition closed with 137,271 signatures, including 224 from my Carshalton and Wallington constituency.

I have a speech to make about the specific asks in the petition, but I want to make a few remarks first, because there is no denying that the petition and this debate are being followed with great interest across the country, as is the issue of trans rights more widely. The debate has raged not only in this country, but across much of the world. Sadly, it has not been conducted in a well-mannered or well-reasoned way. The discussion around trans people has become so toxic that it frightens people away from engaging with it. Indeed, when the Petitions Committee tried to schedule this debate, it was quite difficult to find a Member to agree to take it on for fear of what might happen on social media should they do so.

To an outsider looking in, it may look like the debate around trans issues is one where there can be only one of two extreme points of view. We have seen the most appalling, dreadful things said on both sides of the debate, with threats, intimidation and venom spat at either side, and there has been a failure to conduct it in a civilised and respectful way. I want to be clear that the failure lies squarely at our doors. It is the failure of MPs, leaders, the media, academia and beyond to make space for a respectful, real and genuine discussion.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that MPs are afraid to engage in this debate because, if they do so, as I have, they receive death threats and, in my case, a threat of corrective rape from a member of my own party?

Elliot Colburn: I completely agree with the hon. and learned Lady. We have failed to make a genuine space to express concerns and come to an understanding with one another, and that has left a vacuum, because, in that space, where the few people making their voices heard want to pull us into one of two very extreme positions, we are left with only one of two options if we want to engage with this debate. It seems we must agree that to be trans is not right or even real and that trans people are inherently dangerous and need a cure rather than support, or, on the other side, we must use trans people as an example of why the entire western liberal system is wrong, and agree that no one can be truly equal until the very foundations of what we understand about society are broken down. The failure to have a real discussion has consequences for us all. We now have a situation where people fear speaking up, and they fear to ask questions in case they get attacked or targeted. There are, of course, strongly held views on both sides, but to shut down discussion and to say that everyone must agree with one’s own worldview, or else, is damaging to society and poisons the debate.

One of the most common things I hear from colleagues in this place—and I am sure Members will agree—is that they just do not know enough about the issue. They have not given much thought to reforming the Gender Recognition Act 2004 before, and, as far as they know, they have never met a trans person. That is completely fine, but it therefore falls to us, when we bring these matters to a national platform, to allow space for discussion to happen, so that we can explore and ask questions.

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): Given that we are legislators, does the hon. Member agree that, particularly when talking about some of the most marginalised people in society, we have a job to educate ourselves? In actual fact, we have had five years to educate ourselves.

Elliot Colburn: I agree with the hon. Lady, who leads me towards points I will come on to later.

If we allow this toxicity to continue and refuse to lead from the front, we will end up in the situation we are in now, where we have ridiculous public conversations about erasing language or trying to figure out if certain words are offensive, and where we label anyone who expresses concerns about the protection of sex-based rights a TERF—trans-exclusionary radical feminist—or transphobic, rather than actually talking about the issues. If we allow that to continue, we abdicate our responsibility as a House and, most importantly, we forget the people in the middle of all of this: the hundreds of thousands of trans people living in the UK, who, like the majority of us, just want to live their lives. They do not want this massive, toxic debate about their existence going on. They just want to be able to live their lives.

I plead with colleagues to use today’s debate as an opportunity to change that narrative. Let us lead from the front, have more respectful discussions and debates with one another and explore these issues without the

[*Elliot Colburn*]

need to rip each other's throats out. From looking around the room, I know that there are strongly held views on both sides of the debate. Colleagues will no doubt want to focus on appalling things that have been said and done on both sides of this debate and talk about the more nasty and absurd parts of the far ends of the debate. However, I urge colleagues to just take a moment.

People say that this House is at its best when we come together in total agreement on an issue and get things done, but I would like to go further. I genuinely believe that this House can demonstrate its strength and the strength of the democratic process by coming together on an issue where there is not agreement, creating space to talk about that respectfully and finding a way forward. That demonstrates the best of what this House can do.

I hope today will be that opportunity. We do not do ourselves any favours by taking the easy road of appealing to those who we think are shouting the loudest. Please, colleagues, join me in rejecting the Twitter-isation of this debate, where our arguments are condensed to miniature soundbites. We can find the answers and a way forward together, rather than tearing each other apart.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Member is making an important argument to frame the nature of the debate, but does he agree that it is sometimes important that we do not talk in big, grand narratives about our political beliefs one way or another? This debate is specifically about the GRA and the process of applying for a gender recognition certificate, so colleagues should not be having these big, grand debates about trans issues and feminism. Instead, we should talk about the practical things that the GRA and GRC do. It does two practical things, and nothing else. It does not give someone rights to anything other than the following two changes: a birth certificate and pension rights. We should limit the debate here to that. That will provide civility.

Elliot Colburn: The hon. Member has second-guessed what I am about to move on to. I truly believe that there is a way for the House to come together on this issue. As a member of the Women and Equalities Committee, which conducted a very recent inquiry into reform of the GRA, I was struck by how much agreement there was on both sides of the debate on many of the practical issues this petition is calling for. There was also repetition of what the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) said, specifically on the issue of the application process for the GRC. After all, that is what the petition is all about. Much of the discussion has centred around access to such things as single-sex spaces, but those are not catered for in the GRA or included in the scope of this petition; they are instead governed by the Equality Act 2010, which sets out provisions around single-sex spaces. It is right that we make space for that discussion to happen, because part of the reason that the debate has become so toxic is the confusion around the application of the Equality Act and its relationship with the GRA.

Joanna Cherry: May I just disagree with the hon. Member on the legal impact of the single-sex provisions in the Equality Act? There is a respectable body of

opinion that there will be an impact on the single-sex provisions in the Equality Act, and we are waiting for guidance to come out from the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Does he agree that that guidance is much needed and will bring some clarity to the debate?

Elliot Colburn: I agree with the hon. and learned Lady on the point of guidance, and I will come on that point next. It is the failure of successive Governments since 2004 and 2010 to produce any guidance about the relationship between the GRA, the Equality Act and the exemptions provided for that has led to a disjointed application of those exemptions in much of public life. There are those who use it to exclude everyone, those who use it to exclude no one and a large majority in the middle who simply do not know what to do, because there is no guidance from the centre as to what best practice looks like.

I therefore urge the Government to look again at the recommendation of the Women and Equalities Committee to produce that guidance and to convene an advisory panel of those on both sides of the debate to look at what that guidance could look like and to bring that guidance before the House so that we can debate and discuss it.

I want to focus specifically on the application process for a gender recognition certificate, as catered for within the petition. In the Select Committee inquiry, we received evidence from those in favour of further reform and those who were against it, but what struck me was how much agreement there was between the two sides on the application process. Indeed, the three big asks for reform of the GRC application process were more or less welcomed universally. I strongly hope that the Government will have a chance to look at those in a bit more detail.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I absolutely agree with the hon. Member that we need to have a civilised discussion about this issue, but given the difficulties and given that it is clear that the Act as it stands creates huge problems for transgender people, does he agree that we need reform of the Act?

Elliot Colburn: Absolutely. There is a strong case, simply if we look at the statistics around GRCs, to show that the process does not work. The fact that only 1% to 3% of trans people go through the process of obtaining a GRC demonstrates to me that the process is too bureaucratic, too expensive for many and simply not fit for purpose.

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): I hear the point that my hon. Friend makes, but should we not also consider whether GRCs fulfil any useful purpose? The GRA was introduced in 2004, at a time when we did not have same-sex marriage. We now do, so what is the point of a GRC?

Elliot Colburn: I think the point of a gender recognition certificate is the difficulty that trans people have in getting their legal gender recognised by very many bodies. That is why reform of the GRA to allow for an easier process to obtain a GRC is needed. We may need to come on to a discussion later about whether GRCs are fit for purpose in their entirety, and I would welcome that discussion, but given what we have been left with

through these two bits of legislation, the first step is reform of the GRA to get us to that point—then we can look to the future.

The changes that were recommended in the Government's 2018 consultation and in the two Women and Equalities Committee inquiries focused on three particular asks. The first was for the removal of the requirement to obtain a diagnosis of gender dysphoria before applying for a gender recognition certificate, as well as removing the need to provide medical reports detailing all treatment that people have undertaken. Both sides of the debate throughout the Select Committee inquiry agreed with that. The 2018 Government consultation showed that 64% agreed with removing the need for a diagnosis and 80% supported the need to remove detailed medical reporting.

The second ask was for the removal of the spousal veto, which requires a married transperson to obtain consent from their spouse before getting their legal gender recognised. Again, in the Select Committee inquiry there was agreement about this from both sides, and 85% of consultation respondents agreed that it should be scrapped.

Finally, there was a call to remove the need for transpeople to provide evidence that they have lived in their so-called “acquired gender” for two years prior to obtaining a GRC. That was condemned very strongly by both sides because it was felt that it reinforces gender stereotypes, and because there is no agreement on how to define or prove that someone has lived as a man or a woman for two years before obtaining legal recognition of their gender. Again, nearly 80% of people who took part in the Government consultation agreed that that should be removed.

Instead of having to collate all the information and submit it to the gender recognition panel, which from the anecdotal evidence we received is very confusing because there does not seem to be any accountability as to who sits on that panel or how it operates, the call was instead for a form of Registrar General to be introduced in England and Wales, before whom transpeople would have to make a legal declaration to an official in order to obtain a gender recognition certificate and legal recognition of their gender. That would, of course, come with consequences in law for any false declarations being made.

That change would not allow people to self-identify without an application to an official. The phrase “self-identify” has been confusing and, potentially, unhelpful. I admit that it conjures up images to those on the outside, who might think people can just wake up one day and decide to change their gender. That is not what the petition calls for, and I do not think anyone here would recommend that.

The model I have outlined has already been introduced in a number of countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Ireland, Denmark, Norway, France, Portugal, Greece, Iceland, Luxembourg and Malta, as well as four provinces of Canada and 10 states in the United States, and it is being introduced in New Zealand and Germany. The Irish model is probably the closest example to what some campaigners have been asking for, and is reported to have worked particularly well.

There is a lot of agreement, Sir George, about reform of the application process to obtain a GRC, so I hope the Government can take that away and look at it again,

and that colleagues here, as well as those who have not taken part in the debate but would have liked to, can come together to realise that politics is a battle for hearts and minds, but we do not need to be at each other's throats to talk about this subject.

There are strongly held views, and a temptation to steer the conversation into areas that are not directly relevant to the GRC, but we have to appreciate that transpeople face huge challenges in the country today, not least recognition of their gender, as well as the violent and sexual crimes to which they are subjected. They are twice as likely as other LGBT+ people to be subjected to conversion therapy, for example, and they face discrimination in their everyday lives.

However, there is reasonable and understandable concern, particularly from women, about the protection of sex-based rights. That comes from unacceptably high levels of physical and sexual violence towards women, which creates concerns about erosions of these rights. We must allow space and time for everyone to legitimately be heard, and to find a way forward.

Change is a slow process. I know that is frustrating to hear, particularly in the age of social media in which we live, where we demand instant gratification and action, but in my short time in this House I have found the real world, and the battle for hearts and minds, to be infinitely more complex. We have a duty to lead from the front, in order to remove the toxicity from the debate, because continuing in that way will not end well. It will just push people further in one of two directions, or leave them afraid to say anything or to act.

I urge colleagues to join me today in trying to take the toxicity out of this debate. Let this be the moment that we come together to do more and express the real and genuine concerns held on both sides, so we can work towards what everyone wants: a society where the rights of all are respected, and where what people get out of the country is what they are willing to put in.

Let us try to be the leaders on this issue that the country needs right now and calm this debate down, working together across the divide to find the answers and find the way forward.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, in view of the number of people who want to speak in this debate, I will have to impose a time limit from the beginning. The time limit that might work—I may have to adjust it if it does not work—is seven minutes.

4.50 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure, Sir George, to serve under your chairpersonship. I will only make a brief contribution, because I have expressed my views on this issue many times in this place, although I do not think we have had enough debates on issues around the real lived experiences of trans and non-binary people. I think we ought to have more debates on those issues, and conduct them in the civilised and courteous way suggested by the petition's promoter, the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn).

[Stephen Doughty]

I will start—helpfully, I hope—by giving some context. I am glad that our party is committed to ensuring that trans and non-binary people can live their lives with equality, dignity and respect, and I am proud of my own Government—the Welsh Government—for the unequivocal support they have given for trans and non-binary rights and for reform of the GRA, and for consideration of the very matters that are under consideration in this debate today. Obviously, the Welsh Government do not have some of those powers; they have expressed their concerns about the failure to bring forward the reforms that were promised in the past by the UK Government. I hope that we will see those reforms come to fruition, because they are what trans and non-binary people, and their allies, are requesting, and I believe they are what is needed to ensure that trans and non-binary people can live their lives with freedom, dignity and respect.

Of course, such reforms sit within a huge range of issues that affect the lives of trans and non-binary people, as the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington pointed out at the start of the debate. I am sorry that in the debate on these issues over the last couple of years in particular, their actual lives and lived experiences have been used by some as a wedge issue and by some as a form of ridicule, or simply reduced to academic or philosophical debate—or worse, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, to a couple of words on Twitter. These people are real people; they are not represented in this part of the room today. Their voices are not going to be heard, although I am sure that many people here will speak up for them. I will start by sharing a couple of reflections based on my conversations with people in the trans and non-binary community.

One concern is that there has been a very unfortunate and at times vicious debate, while the actual needs of trans and non-binary people—physical health, mental health, access to public services and access to legal equality—have not been considered. There are so many issues, including the experience of hate crime, which has significantly increased, as indeed it has against all protected characteristics, and against all women and young people; we have seen horrific incidents. The crimes against trans people have increased significantly over the past five years, and that is not just down to increased willingness to report. It is a fact. I have had trans constituents come to me to tell me about horrific experiences that they have had, alongside many other people who are experiencing such things in their daily lives. As I said, the actual issues and challenges that people face in their lives are being put to one side.

I held an event in Parliament a couple of years ago—in fact, I was very nervous to hold it, because some of the things that happen whenever someone speaks out—with the trans and non-binary community, but for me it was one of the most powerful events in this area because it was with young trans and non-binary people, and their parents. A number of Members who were present at that event are here today. The most crucial thing that we did was to listen to people's actual experiences—to the candour and frankness that parents expressed about some of the challenges they had been through, and to some of the challenges that the young people had been through. We just listened to what they had to say; we did not judge.

The overwhelming feeling in that room was a sense of love, care and support. There will be others who are much better placed to make the technical and legal arguments and distinctions than I can, but if we put those principles at the heart of this debate, remembering that we are talking about people's real lives and existence—people who have suffered and suffer incredibly every day and every week—we could help to make this place and this country a better place for all trans and non-binary people.

Wera Hobhouse: In many ways the hon. Gentleman has already answered my question. Nearly 100 hate crimes against transgender people were recorded by Avon and Somerset police, and the number in London is probably threefold, but we do not even know what the actual numbers are. Given the enormous discrimination that transgender people face, does he agree that at least making the recognition process easier would be a good step forward?

Stephen Doughty: I wholeheartedly agree.

I will end on this reflection—no doubt, I will receive criticism and abuse online as a result. I have spoken out in this place about the conduct of a number of newspapers and others reporting the stories. I had the displeasure a few years ago of visiting the Bishopsgate Institute's archive of LGBT+ material, which is a fantastic resource, much of which will hopefully end up in the new Queer Britain museum; I was looking back at some of the headlines and stories from the past, and the discrimination and hatred that was directed against other members of the LGBT+ community. We see that reflected again today in similar headlines, myths and mistakes. One of the biggest problems is that there is not a courteous and respectful debate about the technical and legal issues, but rather one driven to ridicule, hurt or actively undermine the position of people who exist, are living their lives, and simply want to get on with their lives with dignity and respect.

I urge all those with strong views on this issue to think about the impact, because I do not want to have, as I have had, constituents who are trans and non-binary people ringing me up in tears about the latest headline that they have seen in the newspaper, or the latest abusive row on Twitter or social media. We should just let people be who they want to be, respect that, give them dignity and show the love, compassion and respect that all human beings deserve, whatever their gender identity or sexuality.

4.57 pm

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): The petition we are debating seeks to reform the Gender Recognition Act to enable transgender people to self-identify into a new legal sex without the need for a medical diagnosis or proof of treatment. In other words, the petition seeks to allow those who have been born male to become legally female or vice versa, with no requirement to undergo changes to their hormones or anatomy, or to be under medical guidance.

Let me be clear: no trans person should face discrimination, and I have nothing but compassion for those who continue to be harassed, abused or stigmatised. Adults should be free to dress and present as they wish, without fear. It is up to all of us to stand up for the dignity and respect of everyone, including trans people.

But what is being requested in the petition is not a minor amendment to an existing law or a demand for trans people to have equal rights, which they have under UK law—rights that should always be upheld by us all. Rather, the demands of the petition are for what I believe—I am afraid I disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn)—would be a fundamental change to the law.

Society, the law and science all testify that we, as individuals, can never fully define ourselves. Rather, our identity comes from a variety of external factors that we cannot change, however much we may want to: the country of our birth, who are parents are, the colour of our skin and whether we have children. None of those physical realities can be altered by our internal thoughts or feelings, however strongly they are held.

The truth is that individual identities are complex and multi-dimensional, but they are as much a function of the things we cannot change as they are of the things we can. Of course, the same goes for sex. Let us be clear: human beings, like all other mammals, cannot change sex. At the moment of conception, when sperm cell fuses with egg cell, apart from rare abnormalities, there are two possible outcomes.

Mhairi Black: I recognise the point that the hon. Lady is making. People often think that we have male and female, but the truth is that 1% to 2% of the global population is born intersex, which means they present characteristics of both sexes. To put that into perspective, 1% to 2% of the population are ginger, so is she telling me that she does not believe in ginger people?

Miriam Cates: I understand the hon. Lady's point, which is why I said that there are these rare abnormalities. People who are intersex should be treated with the compassion they deserve during every medical treatment from birth, but that is different from saying that someone who is born male can choose to be female or vice versa, which is why I said that that is rarely the case. Normally the determination at conception is either male or female, and that is the biological, genetic fact.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Miriam Cates: No, I will make some progress. At the moment of conception, the new cell for a unique human being—the zygote—is the blueprint for every single other cell in that person's body. The zygote divides again and again until there are trillions of cells making up a complete human being. These cells have different functions—muscle cells, nerve cells and blood cells—but every single one of the 37 trillion cells in an adult human has the same genetic code, including the same sex chromosomes.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): What about chimeras? There are people who have different sets of DNA within their genetics. The hon. Lady is simplifying the science; it is actually much more complicated. I know she has a genetics degree, but I have a biomedical science degree, so I hope we can do that—

Miriam Cates: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. As I said, I recognise that there are rare genetic abnormalities. I am simplifying and talking about the majority. The debate is not about people with genetic

abnormalities; it is about people who are identifying as a different gender from their birth sex. They are two very different things, and I am talking about the latter.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Miriam Cates: No, I will make some progress. Every cell in the adult human body has the same genetic code. However much an individual may want to change their sex through surgery, hormone treatment or by changing their lifestyle, it is just not scientifically possible because our sex is written in every single cell.

Sex is immutable. Not only is it immutable, but our sex determines and influences a large part of our identity as people: our biology, psychology and life choices; whether we can become a mother or father; and what diseases we may suffer from. These are established and proven scientific facts, not a matter of individual beliefs or feelings, however strongly they may be held—and I absolutely accept that they are strongly held.

To allow somebody easily to change their sex in law would be to accept as a society that this material reality is not important or that it can be changed in a straightforward way. I do not believe that that is a wise route to take, and it would have wide-ranging repercussions in other aspects of law.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Just on a point of clarity, the hon. Lady seems to suggest in this section of her speech that gender recognition and change should not be part of our law currently. Have I misunderstood her?

Miriam Cates: I will come to that. I believe that what we currently have is a good compromise, and I will explain why.

As well as the broader picture, there are specific impacts of GRA reform that would be significant, such as threatening sex-based rights. There are sound reasons of privacy, safety and dignity for women's requirement for single-sex spaces and services. When using changing rooms and sleeping accommodation or for those in prison, women and girls have a right to expect that there are no males using those spaces. Self-ID could threaten those sex-based rights. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington that we are awaiting guidance on the matter. It could row back decades of progress on women's equality.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I am curious to know whether the hon. Member supports the current GRA and GRC, because what she is talking about in prisons already exists; people can have a GRC but they are not automatically put in the estate based on it. I can give her numerous examples. They are placed depending on an assessment by the prison authorities. What is wrong with the current situation, where the prison authorities make an assessment regardless of the GRC?

Miriam Cates: There is a lot wrong with what is happening in prisons at the moment, but that is beyond the scope of the debate. As I said to the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), I will come to why I think the current law is a good compromise.

Self-ID could threaten these sex-based rights and row back on a lot of progress in women's equality, but the effect on children would also be hugely damaging. We are already seeing a situation in schools and online

[*Miriam Cates*]

where vulnerable young people—often girls, often same-sex attracted, often autistic—are being told that the answer to their problems is to change sex. This is manifesting in a concerning rise in girls who are not only identifying as trans or non-binary, but who are going on to make serious and permanent changes to their bodies that will result in lifelong medical, sexual and psychological problems.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): As a scientist, does the hon. Member accept that hormone therapy is not permanent? The whole point of it is to pause puberty in order to give a child space to make decisions and explore their gender identity.

Miriam Cates: I do not accept that pausing puberty has no repercussions, but it is also the case that 98% of those who are prescribed puberty blockers go on to cross-sex hormones. That is the reality of what is happening at the moment, with a 5,000% increase in the number of girls referred—

Joanna Cherry: The hon. Lady will be aware that Dr Hilary Cass has been tasked by the UK Government with looking at the reasons why there has been such a huge increase in the number of people, particularly young girls, seeking puberty blockers and surgical treatment. Does she agree that we would be wise to wait for the outcomes of that review before taking a final view on whether we should support self-ID?

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Lady resumes her speech, let me say that of course anyone is entitled to make an intervention and the speaker is entitled to take them. I would just warn those who are on the list, however, that their chances of being called will be reduced by the amount of time spent on interventions. I am not trying to dissuade anyone from intervening, but they need to realise that it may jeopardise their own chances of making the speeches that they came prepared to make.

Miriam Cates: I thank the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) for her intervention, and I entirely agree that we must wait for the outcome of that very important review. If we did reform the GRA in the way that is proposed, it would send a signal to children that society accepts that it is true that one can change sex, and I do not think we should be misleading our children in that way. As such, I cannot support the call for reform of the GRA outlined in the petition.

However, I want to say one final word about compassion, because I have no doubt that those who are calling for this change are doing so for reasons of compassion. Western culture has come to define compassion as giving an individual what they need in order to alleviate suffering. Of course, there is a strong argument for that: as individuals, we all have a responsibility to alleviate individual suffering wherever we can. However, as legislators, we have to balance the best interests of society as a whole with the interests of individuals, and here there must always be compromise. The Government's position on the GRA therefore represents a sensible compromise. It is possible for trans people to obtain legal recognition through a GRC, subject to appropriate medical checks

and balances. This upholds the rights and dignity of trans individuals, but also protects the social, legal and scientific understanding of sex that is vital to the functioning of human society.

5.8 pm

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your inestimable chairmanship, Sir George.

I will speak to the actual issue that this petition is about, which is quite narrow and one that I think we ought to all, in our compassionate selves, be in favour of. The issue is how one gets official recognition through the issuing of a gender recognition certificate, which enables trans people to change their birth certificate to the sex that they wish to be—that they regard themselves as—and access certain pension rights without suddenly finding when they have lived their lives in the gender they wish, but do not have a gender certificate, and there are inconsistencies between their birth certificate and their own identity. This is about respect and dignity for trans people's lives and the decision they have made to switch the gender that they live in.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) made an extremely good speech to open the debate. As he hinted at, the current system is onerous, humiliating and intrusive. It is sometimes impossible for people to interact with it, especially if they transitioned many years ago. Trans people have to get two doctors to agree that they effectively suffer from a mental illness; they then have to demonstrate to a panel, which they do not know and from which there is no feedback, that they have lived in their acquired gender for two years. For two years, they have to collect masses of documents such as bills, which can run into thousands of pages, to prove to the panel making the judgment that they ought to be issued with this certificate. They then have to produce other legal documents, all of which cost money, to make a submission to the panel.

I have talked to trans people who have been refused gender recognition certificates without receiving any feedback from the panel as to why. Trans people have to wait at least two years after they began to live in their acquired gender before applying for the certificate; they then have to collect all those things. They often have to pay doctors, because they cannot get access to those kinds of services on the NHS, much less access to the medical services they need for surgery or hormone replacement therapy, often, without going private. They then do not get any feedback on why they have been refused. That is not the kind of process that any decent, civilised society would put anybody through.

As the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington said in his opening remarks, we have a very narrow issue on gender recognition certificates. There is a reason why between only 1% and 5% of trans people have successfully applied for such certificates: it is simply almost impossible for them to do so while keeping their mental health stable.

Nadia Whittome: My hon. Friend is making an extremely powerful speech that is rooted in people's real life experiences. Does she agree that the GRA needs to be reformed to not only make the process quicker and more straightforward and remove the need for medical reports, but offer legal recognition for non-binary people and those under the age of 18?

Dame Angela Eagle: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend's observations. When the Gender Recognition Act was passed in 2004, it was groundbreaking, world-leading legislation. It is now very out of date.

The Act makes no mention whatsoever of non-binary people: if someone wants a gender recognition certificate, they have to pick a gender. However, as we are increasingly coming to realise, many people regard themselves as non-binary and do not want to make that binary choice. They do not regard themselves as either a man or a woman in the binary sense that we all grew up with. We need to ensure that we can facilitate their ability to navigate through bureaucracies and to have a presence, dignity and respect in our state that accords with their feelings and views of themselves.

That is all we are talking about. This debate is not about any of the other issues, although I am more than happy to debate them in terms. If people want to compare nasty threats they have received on social media and in other places, I could do a pretty good job. I empathise with anyone that has had to put up with that rubbish. It is not a way to deal with things. I hope we can keep our heads and have a civilised debate here.

I am extremely saddened that, since the Government said they were going to make this modest change in 2018, we have had a hold-up for this length of time. Meanwhile, trans people have been kept on tenterhooks and there have been attacks on trans people. We have seen the othering of trans people, with tropes now appearing about what trans people are—that they are a danger. I remember the same tropes being directed at LGBT people in the 1980s: “you can't trust them around children,” “they're weird,” and “they are violent and a threat”. While all that has gone on, the Government have not acted.

I am very disappointed that the Equalities Department has not acted on this and that it finally produced a response, 21 months after the original consultation, that said effectively, “Cut the cost of a certificate that is almost impossible to get from £140 to £5,” and talked about digitalisation, but does absolutely nothing about a process that is humiliating, intrusive, difficult to deal with, and ought to be abandoned.

Is gender recognition a threat to others in our society? I would say no. We have seen the reform of gender recognition certificates and processes throughout the world; after leading in the world, we are now falling far behind due to our failure to reform that process. That is why the Scottish and Welsh Governments want to reform it, and why we should want to reform it: just to make it easier for already vulnerable people who desperately require that kind of official declaration—so that they can have access to pensions, for example.

All we need to do is get on with this modest reform, and we need to do it now. I hope that we will hear from the Government Minister that we will have a much better approach to the reform of the GRA than we have had to date.

5.16 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Sir George. It was also a pleasure to listen to the opening speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn), who I think set the tone extremely well.

If there is one thing that I think about this debate, it is that it has become very toxic. It is—dare I say it—rather too binary. There is, in effect, a clash of rights here between sex and gender, and I am afraid that we, as a political class, have failed. We have failed to show leadership in this area, and it is high time that we did. We should not run shy of debating these issues.

However, by viewing the issues through the sentiments of the petition and the existence of the current Gender Recognition Act, we are rather limiting ourselves when it comes to the remedies to ensure that we properly empower people of all genders—however anyone wishes to live and express themselves. As I said in my intervention on my hon. Friend, that Act predates same-sex marriage. We really need to have a fresh look at how we approach all issues of sex and gender in our legislation, because the world has changed. The hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) was absolutely right: the Act was groundbreaking in 2004, but it now looks very out of date.

I make one comment about the toxicity of the gender recognition debate. We can all condemn the abuse and vitriol that people are exposed to when they engage in the debate, but we must recognise that the reason why that happens is that, for many people, this is very personal. It is very personal for the transgender person who thinks that their existence is being erased, and equally personal for women who feel that their sex-based rights, for which they and their forebears fought for generations, are being erased. However, it should not be beyond the wit of us all, as policy makers, to overcome that, because the truth is that they are both right. We have to get behind that and keep up with meaningful solutions.

As I said, we need a fresh look at the whole issue of how we tackle sex and gender in our legislation. I come to the point mentioned by the hon. Member for Wallasey and my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington: the fact that so few trans people actually apply for a GRC. That, perhaps, begs the question of whether we need a GRC. Do we need a GRA that enables people to have a certificate that confirms their gender? In this country, we do not need papers to tell us who we are and how we live.

That is really the point: what useful purpose does a GRC serve? I look forward to hearing the Minister's views on that. I know we are looking at it from what has been described as a “minor reform”, but let us just challenge the purpose of the documentation. What is it designed to deliver? Does it really deliver any enhanced rights over and above those that anyone has under the law as it is?

For a lot of people, moving towards self-ID puts trans people on a collision course with women's rights—a collision course that no one really wants to see—so I want a more challenging approach. For me, the way forward is not about establishing gender recognition certificates; it is about going into our laws to determine where sex matters and where gender identity can prevail.

There are a number of areas where sex needs to trump gender, one of which is health. It is fundamentally unhelpful for people's declared gender to trump their sex on their medical records. We are seeing people not being called for routine screenings, based on sex, for example. The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) said that transgender prisoners

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

are risk-assessed in the criminal justice system—well, they are if they do not have a GRC, but a trans woman with a GRC is automatically put in the women's estate. [Interruption.] It is the transgender person who self-declares who is risk assessed—

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Order.

Jackie Doyle-Price: We have transgendered prisoners with or without a GRC in the women's estate.

It should be for service providers to risk-assess their premises. That would be a safer situation all round. Do we need to rely on a piece of paper that is no longer necessary? I come back to the fact that the Act was passed to enable same-sex marriages, which are now uniformly enabled in law, so do we need a GRC?

The other area where sex really matters is in sport. It appals me, as I am sure it appals most people, that sports governing bodies are turning a blind eye to women's sport being destroyed by transgender athletes, where there is an innate physiological advantage. This is all practical common sense. We as a political class have neglected to grip these issues for so long that we have allowed this toxic debate to happen. We have allowed the extremes to happen, and it is incumbent on all of us, as my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington said in his opening remarks, to bring back some common sense. We as legislators need to have cool heads and come up with a law that suits anyone and that empowers transgendered people to be who they want to be and to live their lives free of prejudice and discrimination, but that enables everyone to be comfortable with that and that protects women's spaces.

5.22 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I agree with some of the things that the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) said; we sit on the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and work positively together. I agree that the debate has become toxic and that we need to find a way forward and to show leadership, but we also need to step back and work out why, over four years ago, there was a call for change. That call was made because the current Gender Recognition Act and gender recognition certificates were not working.

One of the reasons was that the World Health Organisation was going through a process of removing gender dysphoria as a registered diagnosis. As of this year, the World Health Organisation no longer recognises gender dysphoria as a legitimate diagnosis from any doctor in the world. We now require our doctors to break WHO guidelines to continue to abide by the Gender Recognition Act. I am not even talking about the barriers to getting gender recognition, the social problems, the trauma that the issue causes people and the fact that the Act perhaps does not properly reflect lived lives and biology, because it reflects only the mental health diagnosis. Putting all that aside, the very fact that we in this country now require our doctors to give a diagnosis that is no longer internationally recognised should mean that we change the Act, even if it means changing the diagnosis and what a doctor or medical professional looks at.

If we are going to change the Act, it is incumbent on us to consider what a doctor would diagnose. Is it acceptable for it still to be a mental health diagnosis or are other indicators more important, such as someone's self-declaration, the evidence that they might provide, or someone's commitment to live in a particular way going forward? Perhaps those are better indicators for how someone lives.

I am happy to have a debate. Some people might say, although it might not be my position, that we need other indicators to do with how neighbours or friends see us, as we do when we get a passport photo signed off to confirm that it is a true likeness. I can understand why people might want to make sure that there is other documentation.

Clearly, the documentation provided at the moment is insufficient and does not work. The other day, for example, I heard about someone who provided two years' worth of statements. It took six months to hear the case, which the panel then rejected because it said that the two years of statements were six months out of date. It is a Kafkaesque situation: someone submits documentation and there is a delay, so it is rejected. It is no wonder that so few people feel able to submit. In the end, the person had to resubmit, effectively providing evidence in the future, as it were.

There is a problem with the system, and that is the starting point that we have to come from. The Government had that as a starting point but four years ago, unfortunately, they opened a Pandora's box, and the worst fears and nightmares of everyone on all sides of the debate were ploughed in. Rather than showing leadership, they allowed that to fester. Now they have suggested that they will remove the fees, ignoring the fact that people often have to pay for a diagnosis and doctors' letters. It still costs hundreds of pounds; the barriers are rather high. They then talk about going online, but that might make it harder, not easier, for some groups of people. We need to step back and look at the process.

We might have different philosophical views on the wider issues, but I hope that we all agree that this small minority of people should be able to change their gender from the one assigned to them at birth. Their gender will usually have been assigned based on a visual check, with no further requirements for anything else to go on the birth certificate. That means that many people will grow up feeling very different.

I also think that we should recognise that "self-ID" is a particularly difficult term. It is not particularly useful. Most of our gendered spaces are already down to self-ID. There is no law in this country about who uses what toilet—and quite rightly: when such laws have been introduced in other parts of the world, it has been a nightmare. If there were such laws, it would probably be cisgendered women—the term that I would use, although I am happy to discuss terms that others prefer—who would end up getting criminalised: they would tend to use men's toilets in public events, because there is often a huge queue for the women's. That is what would happen if we had laws saying that it was a criminal act to go into the toilet of the wrong gender. Clearly, it would be bonkers and stupid to do something like that.

Most of those spaces are already down to self-ID, so we are talking about only a small number of spaces that might need protections, and they are already protected. We need better, proper guidelines as to how these protections

should be interpreted, but those guidelines need to be written with the trust of all in the community. They need not be seen as some political backlash one way or the other; they need to bring everyone on board.

That also means not trying to rewrite or undermine the progress that many people feel they have already achieved. We cannot suddenly take people's lived lives and their rights away from them. For many trans people, that is what they feel the debate is doing. They feel that there has been some progress, but that people are now trying to shove them in the box. I am not saying that that is anyone's intention, but it is how they feel. We need to address that and move forward with them. I would use the term "positive declaration identification". Maybe that is too wordy, but finding a new term beyond "self-ID" is probably useful in this debate, because we are talking about a legal process.

Finally, it is important that we ensure that we have fairness in this country and that we do not pit different groups against one another. This is not an argument about one or the other.

5.29 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Sir George, in today's important debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for his powerful opening speech on behalf of the Petitions Committee and the petitioners. The debate has become toxic on social media. Quite often when we talk about taking the toxicity out of the debate, we often mean the other side to us, but I congratulate my hon. Friend on the clear balance in his opening remarks, recognising both sides of the debate.

We live in a liberal democracy, where everyone is free to live their lives to their potential, making choices that allow them to live in alignment with their values and true selves, and I support those adults who wish to undertake gender transition and apply for a gender recognition certificate. One of the things that I enjoy most about being an MP is the privilege of knocking on the doors of my constituents. At the beginning of the year, I met a transgender constituent, and we had a long conversation on the doorstep about the challenges that they were facing in gaining a gender recognition certificate. We continue to be in regular correspondence, and I am more than happy to help where I can on such issues for any constituents who need my support.

I understand the petitioners' concerns about the process of gaining legal recognition for those wishing to change gender, especially on the time taken to live in their chosen gender and the need for a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria. Analysis of the current process showed that in 75% of cases a decision is made within 20 weeks of an application for a GRC, and that over 90% of applications are successful. Where applicants do not provide enough information, the panel gives an opportunity and support for additional documents to complete the application to give it a further chance to succeed. The petition closed 13 months ago. In that time, the debate on self-ID has drawn in the voices of those who feel that they may be affected by the ability of anyone to self-ID at any point without the appropriate checks and balances. Women in particular have raised concerns about protecting their ability to access single-sex spaces and services where they are at their most vulnerable. As hon. Friends

have mentioned, those include refuges and hospital wards. There are also concerns from female prisoners who have no choice but to live in close confines with a male-bodied prisoner, potentially not taking hormone therapy, who may choose to self-ID as a woman but has not gone down the legal route to show their intention to live as a different gender.

It is, of course, difficult to measure an individual's intention; however, the current legal framework provides a compassionate yet balanced approach through ensuring that those who want to transition have lived under their new identity. Importantly, it provides time for reflection and assessment for those who want to transition. I believe that the best decisions are ones that are based on good reflection. That point pertains to us in this place, and the decisions that we take as law-makers. There needs to be sufficient time for all of us to understand both sides of an argument and hear all voices, not just the lobby group that is the best funded and has the loudest voice.

The debate on reforming the Gender Recognition Act and the provision of gender recognition certificates is by no means over, and the Government response has been to acknowledge that the process for applying for a GRC needs to be kinder and more straightforward. I believe that the Government have got the balance right by decreasing the cost of a GRC from £140 to £5, with the intention to move the application process fully online. However, as long as the debate continues I will speak up for women and girls in particular, who need to have a voice representing them in the debate, and whose rights to access single-sex spaces needs to be protected. We all deserve to have our human rights acknowledged, respected and recognised in law. Sometimes those rights come into conflict, and it should not be in the too-hard basket to find a common-sense solution, even if that requires additional funding, so that we can protect and support everyone.

5.33 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. When I have approached the issue previously, I have preferred to listen rather than speak and to learn rather than lecture. I want my action to be founded in evidence and driven by compassion, while underwritten by an unshakeable belief that trans rights are human rights. As a socialist, it has always been my goal to represent the underrepresented, to strengthen the rights of minorities, and to make our country as easy to live in for the vulnerable as it is for the privileged. Sadly, it is a fact, not an opinion, that our country currently is not a welcoming place for trans and non-binary people. Yes, it is better than some places, but better is not enough, and it is little consolation to those affected, especially when LGBTQ+ crime has doubled in the last five years.

As MPs we have a responsibility to drive positive change to materially improve the lives of trans and non-binary people. It is obvious that the Gender Recognition Act is in urgent need of reform. The process of changing gender is too complex, too bureaucratic and too mentally damaging to those who must endure it. Many people wait more than five years for an initial appointment at the gender identity service, while also attempting to navigate the many hurdles in the way of legal recognition of their gender.

[Mary Kelly Foy]

The existing system simply is not fit for purpose. The need for overarching reform is clear. That reform must begin with the introduction of self-identification, and it is a damning indictment that the Government have refused to deliver on some of their promises on trans rights. There is very strong support for the introduction of self-ID and progressive reform to the Gender Recognition Act, with 137,000 people having signed the petition. The response to the Government's own consultation on this issue showed overwhelming support for removing the need for the distressing and often humiliating bureaucratic hurdles that prevent people from achieving legal gender recognition, including scrapping the need for a gender dysphoria diagnosis, a medical report and evidence that an individual has been living their preferred gender for at least two years.

While this debate is often portrayed as a clash between the hard-won rights of women and the advancement of trans rights, the reality of the situation simply does not support that argument. In 2020, polling by YouGov found that 57% of women supported trans people being able to self-ID, and just 21% opposed. There is simply no contradiction between being a feminist and a trans ally. I am therefore keen to reject the culture war that some are all too happy to stir up, because to engage with it ignores the very real human element of the issue.

Trans people are not a political football; they do not want to be the defining cultural issue of our time, and they are tired of their very right to exist being debated. They simply want to live their lives without barriers, discrimination or abuse. Is that really too much to ask?

5.37 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy), the city of my alma mater. I enjoyed her contribution about listening before taking part in these difficult debates. I pay huge tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for his tone when opening the debate. It was an important lesson in how to conduct these difficult conversations.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price); over the last two years I have spent many hours with her discussing these issues, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) rights. We tried to put together a common position in the group that could be agreed by all LGBT groups of all the major political parties, to understand all the reasonable concerns coming from people who are described as gender critical, and to meet those anxieties with all the reasonable reassurances that people ought to be able to expect. It is a great shame and pity that we did not manage to convince the Government to adopt that position within a wider statement of reform of the Gender Recognition Act. I urge the Minister to revisit that statement—it is still absolutely valid and is sitting on the website of the all-party parliamentary group. I urge him to look at it as a basis of how to move forward and find reassurance on the side issues around the Gender Recognition Act.

What we need is for the heat to be taken out of this debate and to let the light in. As many Members have pointed out, what a gender recognition certificate does

is very limited. It simply allows a trans person to record their gender accurately on their birth certificate, and to be fitted into the appropriate actuarial models for pension provision and apply for a job or university degree without fear of being outed by default. They do not have any legal bearing on provisions around single-sex spaces, which are governed by the provisions of the Equality Act. These problems are in large part technical, but they have an outsized impact on an individual trans person's rights to privacy and dignity. As a Conservative committed to protecting the rights and freedoms of the individual, I would like to see this process improved so that it can best serve the people it is meant to protect.

The current system is byzantine and bureaucratic, and contains provisions that, after 26 years—as others have said—seem to border on the cruel. In particular, I highlight the requirement to live in one's new gender for two years, and the spousal veto. I am not sure that I can imagine a universally satisfactory benchmark of masculinity or femininity. Without any agreed definition, how can it be reasonable or fair to expect any person to live within such poorly circumscribed limits? I do not envy the members of the Gender Recognition Panel who have to hack their way through this Gordian knot of legal ambiguity and cultural stereotyping to implement their decisions.

As a gay man who was married to, and is now separated from, a woman with whom I have two children and am still friends, I know all too well that coming out as an LGBT+ person can have significant effects on a marriage. It is also clear that the current system serves only to make very personal decisions even more difficult, and giving one partner extraordinary control over another's autonomy does not seem right today. I recognise that in certain circumstances, one partner's transition may affect the integrity of a marriage, and I agree with the Women and Equalities Committee's report that it would be sensible to offer more streamlined routes to annulment in this instance.

Ultimately, the failures of the system as it currently stands are evidenced by the minuscule take-up of the gender recognition certificate. Only 4,910 certificates had ever been issued at the time of the 2018 consultation—as little as 1% to 3% of the UK trans population. That is despite the fact that when surveyed, the vast majority of trans people declare an interest in obtaining a gender recognition certificate. It is patent that the process is not fit for purpose and does not adequately serve the population it is meant to protect, and none of the changes introduced in 2020 have changed that at all.

The recent appointment of Lord Herbert as the Government's special envoy on LGBT rights, and my hon. Friend the Minister joining the equalities team and responding to this debate, are a happy harbinger of this Government's renewed commitment to the dignity and rights of trans people. Reform of the GRA would not only bring the UK in line with other western countries such as Ireland, Denmark, France and Greece, but would bring the technical aspects of the law governed by the GRA in line with other aspects of UK law today.

Layla Moran: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the most egregious parts of the current process is that there is no right to appeal, which completely goes

against the principles of natural justice in almost every other part of our statute book? That is one aspect that is not planned to be changed.

Crispin Blunt: The hon. Lady has made her point extremely well and succinctly.

Changing the gender recorded on one's passport or driving licence does not require a gender recognition certificate. Changing the gender on one's bank account or medical and employment records does not require a gender recognition certificate, and changing one's name does not require a gender recognition certificate. I can see no logical reason as to why the gender marker on the fundamental document that gives entitlement to one's nationality and from which every other piece of one's identity flows should be subject to more prohibitive regulation than any of those other documents and processes, but the fundamental importance of the birth certificate means that there needs to be a gender recognition certificate process. To continue to enshrine that inconsistency within British equality law only exposes trans people to the threat of discrimination.

Reform of the GRA would form a simple and natural component of the Government's agenda to harmonise equality law and implement a practical and purposeful policy to make a tangible change to the lives of trans people. Some 137,000 putting their name to the petition we are debating today ought to give the Government pause for thought. That is as many people as took part in a massive consultation on the GRA in the first place. This issue matters; it is not an enormous change and we should make it.

5.44 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George.

As has been said very eloquently by previous speakers, having a gender recognition certificate or GRC actually helps in only a handful of legal situations, such as those related to marriage, taxes and deaths. That is it—it is nothing to do with prisons. A GRC is not required to update the sex on someone's passport or driving licence; it is not required to use single-sex spaces, such as toilets or changing rooms. What we do know is that the current process is deeply invasive, traumatising, unnecessary and dehumanising.

In the last decade, 17 countries have passed reform of some kind relating to their own Gender Recognition Act or equivalent, and there have been no complaints. There is no sound argument for this legislative change to be delayed any more. Yet, if people watch the media, we are constantly bombarded with this idea that there are legitimate concerns. That is fair; I do not doubt that there are legitimate concerns out there. However, the answers are also out there.

Whenever I have tried to pin down someone as to what the legitimate concern is, it always seems to relate back to this concept of self-identification, or self-ID. So, first, let me say that self-ID is not a new concept; it is the right that all of us have to identify who we are. Every time someone fills in a form, they are self-identifying their nationality, their sexual orientation and their religion. Every time someone goes to pee, they are self-identifying which toilet facility best

suits their needs: "Do I need baby facilities? Do I need the disabled toilet? Male or female? Is there a unisex toilet?"

The Equality Act 2010 made it explicit that trans people also have the right to self-ID and it laid out exemptions for single-sex providers if any issues were ever to arise. Reforms to the GRA do not affect the Equality Act 2010 or the exemptions within it, so that is not a reason to delay reform.

We hear claims that women's rights are being threatened; we have heard that today. Well, I am a woman and I do not feel threatened; if anything, the thing that makes me feel most threatened is quite often the very aggressive and often male anonymous accounts that proclaim to be defending me from something. If we look at what most experienced women's organisations and female service providers are saying about GRA reform, we see their overwhelming support for it. We see acceptance and active campaigning, not just for GRA reform but for the trans community more broadly, because those organisations and providers have been dealing with these issues long before the Equality Act 2010 was even written.

We have had three public consultations showing overwhelming support for reform, particularly and consistently among women. Women's rights are unaffected by GRA reform and the majority of women know that. However, the truth is that GRA reform has only been delayed because it has become a battleground for a proxy war, or culture war; it has become a breeding ground of disinformation, radicalisation and the rollback of already established LGBT+ rights.

The rest of the world is watching right now as Britain is in the full grasp of a moral panic. The fact that Britain has been internationally identified as having a problem with transphobia has not come out of thin air. Despite expert opinion, despite mountains of evidence, despite knowing the lived experiences of trans and non-binary people, and despite numerous consultations and debates, five years on we are still dragging our heels.

As I said at the start, as legislators we have a responsibility to educate ourselves about this stuff. I think that five years is more than long enough to do that. As legislators, we have allowed disinformation and confusion to run rife. We have created an environment that allows transphobia and ignorance to thrive. So, when we see that hate crimes against LGBT+ people and self-harm in the trans community have both risen, can we really go home and say that we are completely blameless?

Let me make the situation as clear as I can. If someone does not support self-ID, their issue is not with the GRA; it is with the Equality Act 2010. If someone wants to start removing established rights formed over a decade ago under the Equality Act, at least be honest about that. Tell people that that is what you are campaigning for—say it with your chest, but do not dare say that you are doing it in the name of defending women, because that just does not stick. If we do not pursue the reforms, all I can say is that I hope history judges us as harshly as we deserve.

5.50 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to see you in the Chair, Sir George. I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for introducing the debate so clearly.

[Luke Pollard]

I am a trans ally. I believe strongly that trans men are men, that trans women are women and that being non-binary is valid. I am proud to be Plymouth's first out Member of Parliament. I think that gives me not just a platform, but a responsibility to talk about LGBT rights. I am proud to be the first person to get "massive gay" in *Hansard*, speaking in a Westminster Hall debate, because for me it makes it authentically Luke, something I can look at and go, "Well, that is me."

The debate needs a lot more authenticity in it, and for a lot more of the lived experience and actual reality for trans and non-binary people to be present in it. If we had that, yes, we would have more discussion of hate crimes and fear, but we would also have more laughter, more honesty, more love and compassion, and more authenticity from people who are able to be themselves. We could revel in and celebrate people being able to be themselves, free from fear—a fear of not being who they are—and from the pain that prevents them from being who they genuinely are.

Wera Hobhouse: I agree with everything that the hon. Gentleman says, but is it not also important to listen to the fear of women? I am not one who will stoke the fear of women, but is it not important to give that space to women at least to express what they fear?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Member for agreeing that I am a massive gay. I appreciate that. There is a place and a need to listen to groups who feel that they are not being heard in the debate, and I will come to that in one moment.

We need to look at the specifics of what we are debating today. My speech could talk about trans rights in the wider sense. I could talk about hate crime and about a whole range of things, but the petition does not talk about those things. The petition is specific; it talks about updating a broken and bureaucratic system that is not working and that is costly to the taxpayer and to the person going through that system. In that space, we should all agree that it is broken and that it should be fixed.

The agreement that we are so painfully trying to avoid is what we should pull out of the debate: the GRA should be reformed. It is a broken system. It does not deliver what we need and it incurs massive cost—not just through the pounds, shillings and pence spent by people applying to go through the GRA process and amassing the documents, but through the mental health crises that frequently follow the experience of going through that process. There is a cost in the lost opportunities, the jobs not taken and the taxes not accrued. We need to look at the lost opportunities, which is why it is so important to look at the issue.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) that self-ID is a problematical term. It is. It is difficult. It has opened up people's ability to attach things to the debate that are not in it. If we attach more and more things to the debate, we lose sight of what we all agree on. We agree on lots in this space, and disagree on less. If we put the focus on where we disagree, rather than on where we agree, we find ways to throw stones at each other, which I do not believe to be right, and we find ways to use

unhelpful language. I am not abnormal because I have a boyfriend. My trans friends are not abnormal because they are trans. We should be clear about that. It is not suitable to have the word "but" at the end when we say something; we need to recognise the innate human value in each of us along the way.

In particular, I want us to look at the process through which the GRA causes difficulty. I share the concerns expressed more eloquently than I can about the difficulty of amassing the documents, the delays, the lack of a right of appeal, the confusion, and the fear for many trans people of having a panel of people they do not know deciding on their lives. That is humiliating and dehumanising for lots of people. If we had that process to access any other public service in any other walk of life, we would all, regardless of our party, say that it was inefficient and uncaring and call for its reform. Let us focus on that part to make sure it can be there.

When I asked my trans friends in Plymouth what they wanted, they agreed that the GRA process was not working—those who have tried to participate in it are very clear on that—but what they most want us to do is to focus on getting through this debate, and then to talk about healthcare and their difficulties in accessing it. We need to be clear that just as justice delayed is justice denied, healthcare delayed is healthcare denied.

One thing that has not been mentioned is the regional inequality that sometimes comes with this. Much of the debate around trans healthcare has a metropolitan flavour to it. People tend to talk about London, Manchester or even Brighton, but not about Plymouth or the experience in the south-west. The incredibly long waiting lists are not always talked about. The waiting list at the West of England Specialist Gender Identity Clinic stands at five years and seven months. That is not a waiting list to be proud of; it is a waiting list to shame us. That is why we need to look at what it is possible to change.

We also need to look at the reason for the delay. I turn to the Minister, who I hope will be able to speed this through the Government processes. There are three questions worth looking at today. Why has there been a delay in the first place, and why has it taken the machinery of government so long to come through? It is because the delay is deliberate, not accidental. It is a deliberate space that has been created to weaponise the debate and cause division, and the consequences of that space—the increase in hate crime, abuse and assaults, and in online and in-person hate—do not bother the people who have caused it.

What is the cost of the delay? It is people's lives, experiences and interactions. Allowing someone to change their birth certificate does not deal with the question of choosing which toilet to go to. We need to get over this. Everyone pees, and everyone should have the right to pee.

Who benefits from the delay? We can look at the cost, but what is the benefit? There is no benefit, unless the objective is to create a culture war. In the narrow debate based on the petition, and in the narrow changes on the birth certificate to afford pension rights, there is no logistical or administrative benefit to the taxpayer or the Government. We must ensure that there is no benefit politically for anyone—in my party or anyone else's—who chooses to benefit from increased hate, assaults and abuse towards a marginalised group.

My final point is this. The struggle for equality is a long and difficult one, and we must all keep fighting for equality along the way. Some of us will use decent arguments, some of us will use lived experience and some of us will attempt to use humour, but we must keep it up. We know from the experience of equality movements to date that we do not win by bashing one protected group with the rights of another protected group. That is not how we create equality; that is how we create the opposite. I hope the Minister will speed up the process and reform the GRA so that we can get to other issues that matter to the trans community.

5.58 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, where I am listed as a member of the advisory group of the not-for-profit organisation Sex Matters. I am also a supporter of the LGB Alliance, and proud to be so.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) says that he is a massive gay. Well, I am a massive lesbian—rather more massive than I was in my younger years. I want to challenge everyone who has said in the debate that they want a respectful debate on reform of the GRA. I want to challenge them to live up to their words and listen to the concerns that are held by many women and same-sex-attracted people about the dangers of conflating sex with gender. Like them, I share the view that the introduction of self-identification of sex would negatively impact on existing provisions under the Equality Act. That view is valid and well-founded and has been supported by the recent intervention of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Their concerns centre on the potential consequences for individuals and society of extending the ability to change legal sex from a small defined group who have demonstrated their commitment and ability to live in their acquired gender to a much wider group who identify as the opposite gender at a given point. It is not a modest reform; it is a reform with potential consequences, including those relating to the collection and use of data, to participation and drug testing in competitive sport, to measures to address discrimination barriers facing women and to practices within the criminal justice system.

Reform of the Gender Recognition Act is proposed in Scotland and supported by my party. Last year, our manifesto for the Scottish election stated that

“we will work with trans people, women, equality groups, legal and human rights experts to identify the best and most effective way to improve and simplify the process by which a trans person can obtain legal recognition, so that the trauma associated with that process is reduced.”

Our manifesto also stated:

“We will ensure that these changes do not affect the rights or protections that women currently have under the Equality Act.”

I was content to support that policy, which did not commit the SNP to a policy of self-ID. What I have to say today is in line with my party's promise to work with women, equality groups and legal and human rights experts and to ensure that reforms to the GRA do not affect the rights or protections that women currently have under the Equality Act.

Under the Equality Act, there are a number of protected characteristics, including sex, sexual orientation and belief. We now know, thanks to the employment appeal

tribunal, that belief includes gender critical beliefs such as I hold. The Equality Act also protects people who are at any stage of a personal journey of transition or, indeed, de-transition. So widely accepted are those protected characteristics that when my party was trying to win the independence referendum in Scotland in 2014, our current First Minister, then Deputy First Minister, produced a draft constitution for an independent Scotland that would have enshrined those personal characteristics in the fundamental law of an independent Scotland, alongside the human rights protected by the European Court of Human Rights.

I just want to correct something that the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) said. There are laws about who can use which toilet, and women should not be expected to share their intimate spaces with men. Under the Equality Act, security staff, school supervisors and so on are allowed to set and enforce single-sex rules. The Equality Act exceptions allow that. It is not a matter of criminal law; it is a matter of civil law. It is important to be clear about these things, because if we lose clarity over what the words “male” and “female” mean, it will make it more difficult to set and enforce clear and simple rules for female-only services and women's sports.

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

Some people have been very critical of the Equality and Human Rights Commission for seeming to have modified its position on self-identification for trans people and reform of the Gender Recognition Act, but Baroness Falkner has been very clear that it has done so because new evidence about the tension between trans and women's rights has emerged. I remind those who have sought to impugn the Equality and Human Rights Commission and Baroness Falkner that her appointment was unanimously approved by the Women and Equalities Committee and the Joint Committee on Human Rights after an evidential hearing in this Parliament.

There is ample evidence that the concerns of the Equality and Human Rights Commission are well founded. Only last week in Scotland, we had two major legal decisions seemingly in conflict about the meaning of sex in law. Fortunately, because of the appellate system, we know that the appellate court's decision will take precedence, and the appellate court in Scotland was very clear that as our law stands under the Equality Act, sex is not interchangeable with gender. There is a protected characteristic of sex, but not one of gender. There is a protected characteristic of gender reassignment, but the appeal court in Scotland was very clear that sex means male or female in law, based on biological sex. That is the highest interpretation of the Equality Act in our law at present. The word “women” in the Equality Act does not include males who self-identify as women.

To find out what the general populace thinks about self-ID, we can look at some recent polling. We have had two big opinion polls in Scotland in the past month, and also a BBC survey, which have shown that while the majority of Scots support equal rights for trans people—as, for the avoidance of doubt, do I—they are unhappy about the implications of a system of self-ID of sex without a gatekeeper. That is not because it will discriminate against trans people, but because it opens up self-identification of sex to a much wider group than just trans people—to anyone. Many of the

[Joanna Cherry]

groups, such as the LGB Alliance, which has tried to promote a respectful dialogue around such matters, have not had the sort of reception that the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) has suggested they should. They have been vilified, sometimes by Members of this House. That is not right.

We need to have a respectful debate. By all means, let us reform the 2004 Act, but let us do it in a way that respects the protected characteristics that are enshrined in our Equality Act and takes into account the legitimate concerns of many women and same-sex-attracted people.

6.5 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for his excellent opening remarks and his tightrope walk through an incredibly difficult issue. He did an outstanding job.

On a wet and windy winter evening in around about 2013, I made my way across to Edinburgh for a consultation that was being run by the Equality Network in Scotland. It was on the choice of campaign activity, following the successful equal marriage campaign. I was the only politician to turn up. It was myself and a room full of trans men and women. We had a fantastic discussion about how important it was to improve visibility, acceptance and inclusion, and I gave that process my full support that evening.

I have been campaigning for LGBT rights all my adult life. I have lived my life in the open. I was out at work before it was trendy, and I have faced down prejudice and the usual tropes in the workplace. I remember one particularly challenging story where somebody referred to a paedophile, who was being sentenced on the television, and said, "Well, it's just the same as you." That involved quite a lengthy conversation, basically about how consent is an important, distinct difference, as well as about the many other issues. I have dealt with all of these tropes. I have faced up to them. I marched against section 28. I marched and even performed one year at Pride.

However, since 2019, I have mistakenly thought that my experience of safeguarding in the NHS, my years of activism in response to the HIV and AIDS crisis and my recent role as the chair of Fife Pride would help me bridge the gap between trans rights activists and women's groups. In bringing to the fore questions that hitherto would have been routine to any policy development, I was targeted and quite wrongly labelled among many other things as a "transphobe". The reason was that I would not submit unquestioningly to gender ideology.

What I have witnessed has been horrific. People who call themselves straight allies or queer-identifying straight people have quite literally pushed gay men and lesbians out of our own movement. I can think of no clearer an example than Alexander Bramham, a gay man who was bullied out of Manchester Pride by a straight woman. In all the years I have been out, the worst homophobia I have experienced has been in the last two years, and much of it has happened in this place. Despite my formally raising those concerns, it has not been taken seriously, and it was simply not addressed.

Homophobia is back, and after all the years we spent battering down those barriers, it is back at the behest of Stonewall, and it is draped in a Pride flag. If we remove sex, there can be no homosexual. Sex matters. It is a defining characteristic of who I am. Just saying that has seen me branded a hate figure, targeted for harassment and referred to by an hon. Member in this place as a homophobic b-blank-blank. I will let Members fill that in themselves.

One of the most contentious issues centres on how the word "woman" is defined in law. Does it mean human, adult female, or should it be broader than that and include natal males who decide to live as women and transition? Clarity on that carries significance for how we understand other protected characteristics within the Equality Act, including being same-sex-attracted, and for whether a trans woman who is attracted to a natal female is indeed a lesbian. The ruling from the inner house of the Court of Session last week was unequivocal. For the purposes of the protected characteristic of sex in the 2010 Act, a woman is a natal female of any age, a man in a natal male of any age, and the rights and protections of the trans community are rightly provided under the discrete protected characteristic of gender reassignment. How that decision interacts with GRA reform in Scotland remains to be seen, but as sex and gender are now considered very separate terms that may require further legal attention.

Those issues matter, and that legal clarity is of enormous significance. I pay tribute to Marion, Trina, Susan and everyone at For Women Scotland for their courage, determination and success. I have demonstrated my resilience against outrageous behaviour over the past two years. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), chair of the all-party parliamentary group against antisemitism, and Danny Stone, the chief executive of the Antisemitism Policy Trust, for their confidence, support and guidance.

The impacts ripple well beyond me. Women are being targeted on social media and in the workplace for holding a view that is now an established point of law. They have been told by the First Minister of Scotland that that view is invalid. I hold a deep sadness about the fact that people I have worked closely with have used their influence as LGBT campaigners and politicians to bully, harass and silence women. It is now clear that that is a breach of equality legislation, and it must cease.

For all the years I marched, cared for sick and dying friends, and raised awareness in the workplace, in schools and in my community, my greatest allies have always been women: my mum, my friend Lynn, my friend Fi, my friends Ann and Susan, and many others. They stood by me through thick and thin and I will not abandon them. Now that we have legal clarity over the meaning of sex, we must find a way to tackle the matter, improve the lives of trans people and reform the GRA. As both Baroness Falkner, the current chair of the EHRC, and Trevor Phillips, the founding chair, have made clear in recent days, however, equality is a matter of mutual respect, balance and compromise; it is not something that can be dictated by loud, uncompromising voices. The era of no debate is firmly over. It is time to heal deep wounds and focus on a policy that delivers meaningful improvements to the lives and safety of the trans population, while respecting the rights of others.

6.12 pm

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I am glad to have the opportunity to discuss the petition on behalf of more than 250 constituents of mine who signed it. The Government state, in their reply to the petition:

“We will make the gender recognition certificate process kinder and more straightforward.”

If I understand the Government’s response correctly, they recognise that the current process can be distressing and humiliating, and that more should be done to streamline what can feel like a torturous administrative process. I will therefore use the time that I have to ask what concrete steps the Government are taking to ease that burden. For example, the Government said that they would

“reduce the fee from £140 to a nominal amount.”

The fee has now been reduced to £5, and that is a step in the right direction. There is still a cost attached to acquiring all the documentation required, but the reduction in the fee itself should be welcomed.

The Government also say that they

“will streamline the administrative process and cut bureaucracy by enabling applications via gov.uk”.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), I question whether enabling applications to be made online can seriously be considered streamlining the process. That does not remove a requirement or reduce the number of boxes that an applicant needs to tick; instead, it adds the need to find a scanner and upload all the same evidence and documentation. It is disingenuous to imply that digitising the process is somehow streamlining it. We must also ensure that we do not exclude those who do not have access to the necessary technology. What other steps are the Government taking to make the process kinder and more straightforward?

As we know, the current system requires people to be a certain age, to live in the acquired gender for two years and to obtain two medical reports, one of which must confirm a diagnosis of gender dysphoria. Applicants must make a statutory declaration that they intend to live as that gender for the rest of their life, and submit their application to a gender recognition panel that they never get to meet. Reams of evidence need to be provided to the panel to prove their case. The current requirements are prohibitive, as evidenced by the tiny number of trans people currently in possession of a GRC.

In order to streamline the process, are the Government considering removing the need for a diagnosis of gender dysphoria? That requirement implies that being trans is an illness. In September 2020, the British Medical Association called for trans people to be recognised for who they are, without a medical diagnosis. The requirement is also out of step with definitions provided by the NHS and the Department of Health and Social Care, neither of which see gender dysphoria as a mental illness.

Then there is the opaqueness of the panel itself. Applicants get no explanation if they are rejected, and the rejection is made by a panel that never meets them and does not have to provide any real justification for its decision.

Another barrier is the requirement for spousal consent, as acknowledged by the Women and Equalities Committee in its report published on 21 December last year. That

report recommended that the Government should bring back an action plan for reform to the GRA within 12 weeks, specifically in relation to the spousal consent provision, the requirement to live in the acquired gender and the diagnosis of gender dysphoria. We are now nine weeks into that 12-week timeframe, so I ask the Minister what progress has been made on an action plan and on making this process kinder.

6.16 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for setting such a positive scene. I also thank the 438 Liverpool, Riverside constituents who took the time to sign the petition.

As a member of the Women and Equalities Committee, I have heard significant evidence about the failures of the Gender Recognition Act to support trans and non-binary people in their legal transitions. Instead, those individuals are faced with highly intrusive medicalised and stigmatising procedures. I am proud to have played a role in the report, with the amendments I proposed to reaffirm the principles of inclusion and diversity in our spaces and services, demanding clear guidance and best practice examples around how to prevent and challenge discrimination against trans and gender non-conforming people. These changes and the guidance are long overdue. In response, the Government must take decisive action now to change their destructive approach around trans rights. They are whipping up a culture war between the safety, security and support of females and that of trans and gender non-conforming people, when one can never really be achieved without the other.

In the 13 years since the GRA was first introduced, very few people have applied for a gender recognition certificate and fewer than 5,000 have completed the process successfully, although estimates of the UK trans and non-binary population vary between 200,000 and 500,000 people. There are clearly significant barriers for people navigating the gender recognition process. Several other countries, including Denmark, Ireland and Norway, have brought in a statutory gender recognition process, based on self-declaration, that has been recognised as best practice by a number of our own trade unions and prominent trans rights campaigners here in the UK. Labour will implement that process once in Government.

Such a process would be far quicker, more transparent and more accessible than our current processes. Over 80% of the 100,000 submissions to the Government’s GRA consultation called the requirement for a medical report as part of the current gender recognition process “intrusive”, “costly” and “humiliating”. In 2019, the World Health Organisation announced that it no longer considers gender dysphoria to be a mental health issue. There is a groundswell of support for reform along these lines, even among the most polarised groups, as we heard time and again during the Women and Equalities Committee inquiry.

As an absolute bare minimum, the Government must take immediate steps to remove from the gender recognition process the requirement to live in the acquired gender for a set period of time, the medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria and the spousal consent provision. There is overwhelming support for the removal of those matters from the process of obtaining a gender recognition

[Kim Johnson]

certificate, and that would go a huge way towards removing some of the most stigmatising, humiliating and disempowering barriers to people legally changing their gender.

It is absolutely damning that the Government have done nothing but dither and delay and have so far refused to engage with those simple and practical steps, four years after their own consultation. As the Women and Equalities Committee's report detailed, their reluctance to engage and their behaviour in whipping up a culture war has caused an immense amount of damage. It is highly concerning that recent reports have shown the EHRC politically interfering in Scottish reform of legislation relating to trans rights, and the commission has reportedly met privately with anti-trans groups. Employees have quit the organisation, citing its anti-LGBT culture.

Although I am proud that the Committee made such strong recommendations in our inquiry, they are worth the paper they are written on only if we have bold and meaningful commitments from the Government and the EHRC to take them forward. Given the behaviour of the Government and the EHRC so far, it is clear that we have a long way to go. It is also clear that the tide of popular opinion is against them. Trans rights are human rights, and we must continue to fight for the rights of trans and gender non-conforming people to ensure that they live and thrive in dignity.

6.21 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Christopher, and to hear so many Members speak with passion on both sides of the debate.

In 2015, the Oireachtas—for those who do not know what that is, it is the Parliament of Ireland—enacted the Gender Recognition Act for Ireland and subsequently sought review of that same Act, which was published in 2018. I am reminded of the words of the chair of the review, Moninne Griffith:

“Equal recognition sends a strong message to LGBTI+ people that we are equal citizens, we are valued, and we belong. As well as equal status, it also addresses the practical realities of citizens’ lives such as protections for families and access to identification.”

It is clear from all sides of the debate that there is a necessity to reform gender recognition. First, at least for me, the pathologising of trans people is an outdated medical practice that seeks to preserve trans identity as a mental illness that requires medical intervention. Secondly, it determines that the body of a trans person requires medical and surgical change—change that needs extensive medical evidence—when in reality it is not required. Thirdly, the present situation fails to meet internationally recognised standards that so many other states, some of which have been profoundly socially conservative, have embraced. I am mindful not only of Ireland but of Malta.

We must also accept that there are no new rights being introduced for trans men and women. For example, gender recognition reform does not affect sports competitions. From my perspective, at least, the Equality Act and the Gender Recognition Act provide that to ensure safe and fair competition in gender-segregated sports, governing bodies can set their own restrictions

on participation by trans people, regardless of the trans person's legal gender recognition status. Gender recognition does not give a person the right to compete in sports that apply that restriction. This will not change.

The gender reform legislation does not affect any NHS clinical decision-making process about minimum age and other criteria for approving a trans person receiving any medical interventions, including hormone blockers, cross-sex hormones or any surgeries. Those criteria are based on international clinical best practice and are set out, at least from a Scottish perspective—the Minister might want to look them up—in the NHS Scotland gender reassignment protocol. Decisions are taken by doctors together with the person based on clinical judgment.

Gender recognition reform does not affect the criminal justice system, at least from my perspective. As I think the Minister will agree, the placement and management of trans people in custody is based on careful risk-assessed decision making. A gender recognition certificate does not give a prisoner the right to move to accommodation for the other sex. Provision will continue to exist for prisoners who are legally female, whether trans or not, to be held in the male estate if necessary for the safety of other prisoners or for their own safety. I see the Minister nodding their head.

Not do I believe that gender recognition affects women's rights or trans people's rights under the Equality Act. The Act sets out when services can lawfully be single-sex only. I think we have heard that point put forward and argued on both sides of the debate. The Act also states that the general rule is that trans people should be allowed to access the single-sex services matching the gender they live in, except that they can be treated differently where that is a proportionate means to a legitimate aim, or excluded in exceptional circumstances. Whether or not the trans person has gender recognition is not part of the rule. None of this will change.

It is clear that much of the debate regarding gender reform has, sadly, been hijacked by a range of extremes, from the politics of biology to the inability to hear the concerns of those who, for various reasons, may be opposed to elements of the reform being considered or to its entirety. That does not lessen the concern, worry and fear of trans men and women who seek only to live as their true self, exercising their own individual self-determination.

We also need to recognise the appalling misogyny that many women, including many in this Parliament, face from those who use the gender recognition debate to ridicule and marginalise the trans community, notably via the politics of biology. I must say to the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) that I am mindful of the words of Norman Cohn, who takes the question of nature and the politics of biology head on. Norman reminds us:

“Nature demands inequality, hierarchy, subordination of the inferior to the superior—but human history”

is

“a series of revolts against this natural order, leading to ever greater egalitarianism.”

Miriam Cates: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: No, I will not. [Interruption.] Actually, I will give way to the hon. Lady. She is taking up my time, though.

Miriam Cates: I would be interested to know how the hon. Gentleman thinks politics and biology interact.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I think the hon. Lady acquainted herself with her notion of politics and biology in her own speech.

My only hope is that the UK Government will recognise that by embracing greater egalitarianism, they will reap the benefits of a society that is more capable of supporting the marginalised and more capable of combating misogyny and transphobia, and that they will for once recognise that the greatest threat to our society is not trans men or women but those who see the world as binary and limited: a narrow society in which the lived experience of the elite dominates the diverse and complex lives of the many.

6.27 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher.

As many have said already, the discussion and debate around trans rights has become divisive and fractious. It is really important that we state that it absolutely should not be. It should be rooted in evidence, yes, but also in compassion and—others have used this word, and I could not agree more—love. That means love for those on all sides, including people I do not necessarily agree with.

In my surgeries, I have spoken to constituents from the trans community, to parents of trans children, and to those who describe themselves as gender critical. In fact, I spent many hours in a Zoom room with someone from the gender-critical community and someone who is non-binary—I am also from the LGBT community. We sat and we chewed it out. We spoke about everything and tried to get to the bottom of where we agreed, which was on most of it, and where we did not. That, I am afraid, is where some of the rub lies. One thing we understood was that our understanding of the words “gender” and “sex” differed. For those on the gender-critical side, the two were different words. For me, frankly, they are synonyms; it is just that one was used more recently. It could well have been replaced in the 2004 Act.

We need to appreciate that those on the gender-critical side are valid; they are entirely allowed their point of view. However, I will put it on the record that I profoundly disagree with much of the gender-critical point of view and especially with those arguments that in any way imply that trans people are a danger to society and women, because they are not.

Drawing false equivalence between trans people and predatory sex offenders, which I have to say is where a lot of the arguments have ended up over the years that I have been debating this, does not do justice to many people who have sincerely held views around same-sex spaces or whatever. That is not where those people want the debate to go, but there are some people who draw those inferences. We need to call that out as just wrong.

The Gender Recognition Act is not fit for purpose. I am glad that the Government seem to recognise that in the modest reforms that they intend to make. Rather than getting bogged down in the legalese and the what-aboutery, I wanted to give whatever time I had today

over to the voices of trans people and their families, so I contacted some of my constituents and said, “Right, you’ve got 150 words. What do you want to say?” I want to make it clear that I have not changed a single word of what they have written.

The first, a mother of a trans child, said:

“The bullying and harassment my child suffered at school took over our lives for a year and a half. I was constantly attending hearings, talking to the school, and making arrangements to move schools.

But I would have gone to any lengths necessary to protect my child. I have a background in education and knew what I could do to make the school listen. It worries me that there are young trans people who don’t have supportive adults to help them through.

Current legislation means young trans people have no legal protection from being outed or harassed. I don’t understand what good reason anyone could have for failing to protect a vulnerable minority in this way.

For my child, once they turned 18 and were able to get a GRC, it gave them the chance to go through life without the fear of being outed. That means having a reasonable chance to live free from discrimination and harassment.”

Many have asked, “What is the point of a GRC?” Well, for that child, it was everything.

Another constituent, a trans woman, told me:

“I knew when I was 4 years old that I was trans. I grew up during Section 28, believed it was not okay to come out, and that I would be bullied if I did. I began to medically transition 9 years ago and still don’t have a Gender Recognition Certificate.

The bureaucracy, money, and invasiveness are significant barriers. I don’t think changing your legal gender needs to be as simple as changing your address at a bank. I understand there are processes that need to be in place. But there is a balance to be struck.

And we cannot ignore non-binary people simply because they don’t fit into our current structures.

I work with young trans people in my youth groups and the real issues for them are mental health and access to gender identity services.

Earlier this year I lost one of my young people to suicide.

We need reform of the GRA, but also understand that transitioning isn’t just about changing your name on a bank statement.

The government needs to listen to the trans community, and reform services to make sure we don’t lose any more of our young people.”

Reforming the Gender Recognition Act will not solve all these problems—it will not reduce waiting times for gender identity services, lessen the impact of gender dysphoria or eliminate discrimination and prejudice—but it will make it easier for a person to apply for legal recognition of their gender. The current process is long, medicalised and intrusive. Improving the process builds a legal framework that respects trans people and acknowledges their lived experience.

My desire as a liberal is for every person in our country, whoever they are, to feel not just accepted but celebrated and supported by society to live a fulfilled and productive life. However, the fact is that for far too many trans people, this country is moving in the wrong direction. Let us properly reform the Gender Recognition Act rather than just tinkering around the edges, which is the Government’s current plan. It is a broken system, it needs fixing, and I simply urge the Government to think again.

6.34 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Thank you, Sir Christopher—I thank Sir George, too—for chairing this debate. I also thank the hon. Member for

[Kirsty Blackman]

Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn). He commented that he needed to be brave to bring forward the debate, or words to that effect, and I appreciate that he chose to do so—it was indeed a brave thing to do.

This is a really important issue. We must make change, especially for the around 500,000 trans people in the UK and their friends and family. What is proposed is a small administrative reform that will have a huge and lasting impact on the lives of trans people in the UK. Clearly, there are differences in the system to obtain a GRC in Scotland—not least that we do not have the spousal veto—but the problems with the two current systems are largely the same, and the changes that need to happen are therefore broadly similar. In Scotland we are undertaking reform, and legislation will be brought forward very soon.

As I stand here making this speech, I am acutely aware of my privilege. I will do my best to amplify the voices and concerns of those I have had the privilege to listen to over the last few years, but that is not a substitute for hearing trans voices directly. We do not have trans people in Parliament. As was mentioned, some of our MPs are unaware of ever having met a trans person. They most certainly have; they are just unaware of it. People who have never met, spoken to or heard from a trans person are not the right people to be making decisions about how gender reform should work. Trans voices are significantly outnumbered in the media on any issue relating to trans rights. That must change, but until it does, it is incumbent on those of us with platforms to make the case for reform on behalf of our constituents and other trans people across the UK.

The current system for obtaining a gender recognition certificate is a failure. The UK Government estimate that there are 200,000 to 500,000 trans people living in the UK, but fewer than 6,000 of them have obtained a gender recognition certificate. Those who have managed to have had to jump through unreasonable hoops in order to get a GRC, and they are in the tiniest minority. The process is bureaucratic, takes too long and includes many outdated and unreasonable requirements. People have to put in reams and reams of paper to do it.

It was said that the reason for those statistics might be that people do not want a gender recognition certificate. That is not the case. I have a passport because I recognise the rights that the passport gives me. I applied for that passport because I did not have to give a detailed description of my genitals in order to get the rights that come along with it. The intrusiveness of the procedure for getting a gender recognition certificate puts off a significant number of people, as do the bureaucracy and the fact there is no appeal process and no ability to find out what has gone wrong if an application is rejected.

Changing the system has no impact on the ability of trans people to correct their gender on their passport or their driving licence; it simply and exclusively applies to birth certificates and issues with pensions. Although it is a small change, it is important for the human rights and the dignity of a significant minority of our population. Birth certificates have an impact on death certificates and marriage certificates. Imagine approaching the end of your life knowing that your death certificate would have the wrong gender on it and that your friends and

family would have to live with that, and spending the last moments of your life worrying about that death certificate being incorrect. We need change for that reason alone, let alone the other compelling reasons we have heard.

We have heard about the number of systems with self-ID. I want to talk about the growing number of individuals identifying as non-binary, because it is specifically mentioned in the petition. Like most feminists, I have always been bothered by gender stereotypes and gendered expectations. I can entirely understand how and why people come to the conclusion that they do not comfortably fit in either a male or a female box. None of the Government proposals I have seen go far enough, or sometimes even acknowledge the existence of non-binary people. That has to change. If we want the legislation to be fit for the future, we need to consider the needs of future generations. Many more young people are uncomfortable with established gender stereotypes and moulds. We must therefore allow non-binary people to identify as non-binary.

The extreme level of misinformation and lies pedalled about GRA reform has created an incredibly fertile ground for hate and abuse. The increase in the number of hate crimes with a trans aggravator neatly illustrates that. We must be more honest. We must not allow those in positions of power to mislead the public about the impact of the proposed reforms. The reforms will only affect birth certificates and pensions—not access to spaces, not passports, not names, not driving licences, not access to surgical interventions, not swimming pool changing rooms, not prisons, not hospital wards and not sports. All those are dealt with under the Equality Act or other Acts. I do not understand why people keep going on about swimming pools. I have been in so many swimming pools with my kids, and almost all of them have mixed changing rooms. That is already a thing. They all have cubicles as well.

In the past week I have been approached by three 50-plus women who wished to speak to me about trans rights. They approached me about the issue; it was not an issue that I had raised with them. All three of them had read about the proposed changes, and all three were baffled by the extreme reaction to a simple administrative change. One of them, who has daughters, said to me, “People should be allowed to live their lives. It makes no difference to me what it says on someone’s birth certificate.” That is the reality.

I want to end on a quote that makes it clear why we need change. This was Mr Elliot’s submission to the Women and Equalities Committee when it called for evidence:

“I had to send several private documents to a group of strangers, at the cost of £140, to let them decide whether I am man enough to marry as a husband, be declared a father to my future children or simply die with the respect of being remembered as a man. I was a boy, and I am now a man, and for six years I have been living that truth outwardly and proud with no rejection of this fact from my loved ones, yet I could still be denied my truth by strangers.”

We need change. The Gender Recognition Act needs to be reformed.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): If we have 15 minutes for the SNP spokesman and 15 minutes for the official Opposition spokesman, that will give us a little more than 15 minutes for the Minister and the short response to the debate. I call Kirsten Oswald.

6.42 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher, and to take part in this important debate. I am grateful to everybody who signed the petition, including those in my constituency, and to everyone who has taken the time to engage with this issue.

I wondered how this debate would go—I suspect all of us did—and it has gone the way that I thought it would. It has been a mixed bag, but I do not think that any of us would disagree with what the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) set out at the beginning. It seems that too often there is far too much heat and precious little light on issues such as GRA reform, and that does not do anyone any good, which is a real shame. People who are directly impacted by the issue and those who are concerned with it deserve to have us conduct ourselves with dignity and respect.

The petition does not ask for much. It asks for a simplified and more dignified process, allowing people to get on with their lives, as the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) said. The process now is degrading, intrusive and traumatic. Indeed, it seems from its response that the UK Government Equalities Office accepts the need for the process to be “kinder and more straightforward”. The reality is that its plans are not going to achieve a process that is particularly kinder or more straightforward, and what the UK Government describe, somewhat mysteriously, as “balance” could charitably be described as a fudge at best.

What we are looking at is a necessary change to make the lives of trans people that little bit easier. It would be a real missed opportunity, and difficult to fathom, if that opportunity were avoided or fudged. That matters because at the heart of this is the issue of trans rights—the rights of a minority group who we have heard today have experienced a surge in hate crime, up more than 76% over the last couple of years, and live with the knowledge of an increasingly hostile narrative in many places. Everyone, whatever their views on this issue, loses out because of that.

Like the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy), whose speech I very much enjoyed, I am a feminist—a middle-aged feminist, so I have been around the houses a few times—and I am really focused on the rights of women, the wrongs done to women, and the need to always stand up for women. For me, those things are non-negotiable, but so is my support, and my party’s support, for trans rights. That in no way diminishes my commitment to always stand up for women. It certainly does not conflict with continued strong commitments to uphold the rights and protections that women and girls have under the Equality Act 2010. In fact, if we look at the world beyond this place, it has never been more important for all of us to stand up for equality, fair treatment and human rights. Indeed, Engender, Scotland’s feminist policy organisation, has also been clear that making the process easier will not impinge negatively on women’s rights.

I say all that because I want to be clear that I absolutely support the need to do better in supporting what the trans community needs to happen. However, I do appreciate and understand that some people have a sincerely held view that is different from mine, and I will always listen carefully and respectfully to views expressed

carefully and respectfully. That is a really important principle. Indeed, the Scottish Government have engaged in listening via the extensive consultations that have been undertaken, and to a greater extent on this particular issue than on any other that I can think of. That is important because we must get this right; we must deliver a system of gender recognition that both complies with international human rights laws and delivers a fairer, more straightforward means of gaining legal recognition.

I note that the Women and Equalities Committee said about the proposed changes in Scotland that

“this could be a move in the right direction.”

That is absolutely true. However, before we get there, the situation as it stands, and the reason that people are concerned with this, bears some reflection. There is obviously no requirement for anyone to have a gender recognition certificate, but it is surely easy to understand why someone would want one. At the moment, only between 1% and 3% of trans people in the UK have a GRC. Those statistics tell us that the current approach, with its focus on medicalisation, very burdensome bureaucracy and very opaque guidelines, is not working.

The responses to both the UK Government and the Scottish Government consultations tell us that people recognise that and support the need for reform. The recent Savanta ComRes poll in Scotland also found majority support, including among women and among under-54s. Perhaps that is no wonder, because who among us would want to deal with life events that necessarily come with admin—things such as marriage, new jobs, pensions, and even death, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) eloquently set out—with the knowledge that our paperwork could be wrong? Even describing it that way seems an inadequate way of explaining the worry and distress that that could cause.

The petitioners’ desire for the system to be simplified is understandable, and when we start to drill down, it becomes even more so. I spoke recently to someone who had had to produce paperwork in quantities that would fill a whole box, making the UK Government’s suggested solution of an online system somewhat difficult to comprehend. That is without even getting into the England and Wales requirement for what is known as a spousal declaration. In what other area of our lives would that possibly be even remotely acceptable?

The UK Government have said that they will reduce costs, which is welcome, but the reality is that the cost of the reports and so on that would be required would put those costs right back up and more, so they are not making it more accessible at all. That is before we even start to look into the difficult issues of medical processes, medicalisation, personal upheaval, social challenges, the significant financial burden—and then someone is faced with the arbitrary decision of a panel of strangers potentially telling them, in essence, “You don’t know who you are.” On any examination, the present system is not working, as my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) said. It is unnecessarily medicalised, it is bureaucratic, it is traumatic, and it is simply not fair. That is why a move to a more straightforward self-declaratory system is needed and makes sense.

[Kirsten Oswald]

Again, to be clear—like others, I have read some statements, particularly online, that are simply false—this reform would not allow anyone to simply get up one day and decide to be a different gender for some nefarious purpose, and then revert. That is just not true. The proposals laid out by the Scottish Government mean that obtaining a gender recognition certificate will remain a serious and lifelong commitment. They include a period of three months living in your chosen gender, a statutory declaration and a further three-month period of reflection, and applicants would still be subject to criminal proceedings for making a false declaration and application. It is not something anyone could enter into lightly. By way of comparison, we could reflect on the experiences of places such as Ireland, Malta, Norway, Denmark and many more, where the process works without any drama and life is just more straightforward.

As the Scottish Government's plans progress, I hope that people can hear the reality of what is planned and that that will be helpful. They will also hear that the Scottish Government's draft Bill does not include any new rights for trans people and that the changes will not affect the rights or protections that women currently have under the Equality Act, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) explained clearly. All of those rights—of both women and trans people—must be protected, including the protection of women's safe spaces.

I say that because, unfortunately, the issue beneath a great deal of the heat in this discussion is the fact that predatory men who attack women exist. Bitter experience shows us that they do not need a gender recognition certificate to do that: they can attack women now, and they do. The problem is predatory men and criminals, not trans people. By conflating those groups and allowing ourselves to be diverted from this reform, we do everyone a disservice.

Doing so also encourages what is already an increasing intolerance in some quarters. It is a narrative that makes me very uncomfortable and takes me back to being a teenager in the 1980s. The hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) spoke very eloquently about this: the public conversation around homosexuality back then was poisonous, corrosive and damaging. We need to be very clear that we cannot and will not go back there on trans issues.

One of the most important points today was made by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). It is important that we are having this debate and I very much welcome it. However, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, there are no trans people participating in this debate. We need to reflect on that. It would be very helpful if we could hear the lived experience and voices of trans people as part of this respectful dialogue.

I close by saying that whatever our different views and opinions, we are all the better for being more open and inclusive and for appreciating that all our rights are important. It is no surprise, perhaps, that I see this issue through the prism of how the country could be better. The better country that I know is coming in Scotland will be more open, inclusive, tolerant and equal: a country where no one's identity is up for debate and where all of our rights matter. It is time for that change.

6.53 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Christopher. It is also a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for leading it. I also thank all of those who signed the petition, including 400 of my constituents in Oxford East.

We all have to recognise that these topics are very sensitive and important, and that they need to be discussed with respect and compassion. Solutions will be found through people working together, not through threats or intimidation in any direction. As my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) rightly said, solutions will be found through learning, not lecturing.

I have to say that I do not like describing these topics as a debate, because that suggests to trans people that the fact they are trans is somehow part of a debate, which is not right. It also suggests that there are two sides that are at it hammer and tongs with nothing in common, and that we cannot find those solutions. I do not believe that that is right. I have the optimism of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). Where there has been disagreement, very often that relates to assumptions around the impact of different measures. My experience is similar to that of my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran): that once those assumptions are unpacked, we can get into the nuts and bolts of the implications of different forms of legislative change. That is surely what we need to be doing in this discussion.

The Labour party is committed to ensuring that trans people, who face persistent and growing discrimination in society as we have heard, can live their lives with equality, dignity and respect, and that everyone can do so. We will resist attempts to roll back hard-won rights. This discussion must take place based on the evidence. I have felt at certain points that we slid a bit away from that evidence in the discussion. There already is accompanying material to the Equality Act. There already is a code of practice produced by the EHRC about how the single-sex exemptions should work. That was produced with the GRA already in existence, so that corpus is already there—it is important that we recognise that.

It is important that we do not conflate gender with sex. We did slide into that quite a number of times during the discussion. We must not conflate gender reassignment with sexuality—it also felt like that took place at certain points. When we have that discussion based on the evidence, the way forward is clear. We need reform of the Gender Recognition Act. It must include a process of self-identification, and we must continue to support the implementation of the Equality Act, including the single-sex exemptions. My party is proud of the Equality Act. It was passed by the last Labour Government. We stand by it, including the provisions on the protected characteristics of gender reassignment and sex, and those single-sex exemptions.

The Equality Act, as is clear from the accompanying material, from the code of practice and so forth, assumes the inclusion of trans people with or without a GRC, as we have been talking about, and protects them from discrimination while allowing for specific circumstances where the single-sex exemption is applied. That is the

right approach, and it is the one that my party supports. We believe that the Gender Recognition Act does need reform, and that reform is a narrow issue. I could not agree more with what my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) said in that regard.

As the Government's own consultation recognised, the current process is

“too bureaucratic, too expensive and too intrusive”.

That must change, and that is why the Act needs to be updated. It has been more than three years since Ministers said they would make it easier for trans people to achieve legal gender recognition and that they would make that process less intrusive. However, as we have discussed, all we have seen are these very limited changes that do not make that difference. I could not have agreed more with the description provided by my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) about the Government's approach. They promised that there would be change, but after many years they have simply not delivered on that promise. I ask the Minister directly whether he genuinely believes there is no case for additional reform.

When the Minister for Women and Equalities announced that there would be no further reform of the GRA, she said she believed in

“individual liberty and in the humanity and dignity of every person.”

Can the Minister tell us how leaving a system in place where a trans person still requires the consent of their spouse to obtain a certificate in 2022 is giving that person individual liberty and dignity? The words of the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) about how dehumanising that is were incredibly powerful. I would also like to hear the Minister's response to the situations described by my hon. Friends the Members for Wallasey and for Brighton, Kemptown—the Kafkaesque situations that people land in when trying to obtain certificates. Can he tell the House how he thinks the minimal changes introduced by the Government will make that transitioning process substantively less intrusive?

In fact, have those minimal changes even begun? Eighteen months on from the promise to digitise this process, it is not clear that anything has actually happened. There does not seem to have been any change. Of course, this is in the context of slow action and even reverses in a number of other areas. When there is cross-party agreement, it is important to acknowledge that. The Government's LGBT+ action plan included many measures that the Opposition strongly agreed with, but when the Minister for Women and Equalities was asked last May to explain why there had not been any progress updates since it was announced, she suggested that the plan had just been abandoned:

“It is probably because there is a new Government in place under the leadership of Boris Johnson.”

Is that plan still there, or is it not? Of course, the plan covers many of the issues we have been talking about today: healthcare, discrimination, hate crime and conversion therapy, where a huge loophole has been introduced by the Government around consent.

This has been an important discussion, and I thank everybody in the House and beyond it who has entered into it in good faith and in the spirit of trying to find solutions. We believe that there is a clear solution when it comes to reform of the GRA, as I have just set out, but amid all this talk about legislative reform, systems

and processes, we should never lose sight of the fact that we are talking about people: their rights, their lives, and their very sense of who they are. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) made that very clear in his comments. We are talking about people who are transitioning to a different gender, and people who have suffered domestic abuse and need somewhere safe to process that. We are always talking about people. As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) said, we must not pit different groups against each other, but sadly, we are seeing far too much of that when it comes to these critical issues. We need compassion, and we need a Government who put compassion at the heart of their response. That is what my party is determined to do.

7.3 pm

The Minister for Equalities (Mike Freer): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Sir Christopher, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for his tone: I expected nothing less. He is known for his thoughtful and gentle approach to many thorny issues.

Today's debate has been a reminder of the strength of feeling around this issue. Since I took up this post, I have been increasingly perplexed by why we cannot focus on people. I have said from day one that I am tired of debate about body parts, because it dehumanises individuals: it dehumanises people who are going through what is not an easy decision, and is most certainly not an easy process. To be absolutely clear, this Government firmly believe that LGBT+ people—I reiterate the T—should be free to live and prosper in modern Britain, and we are committed to ensuring that they can do so. We want people to live their life free from discrimination, prejudice and hate, and to ensure that everyone has the same opportunities in life.

I cannot necessarily address all the issues that have been raised, but I have been making copious notes, and while we may not agree on some of the fundamental reforms that the petition seeks, I have heard loud and clear the many issues—particularly on process—that we need to address. One of the issues that I have committed to taking up since I came into the LGBT+ equalities brief is ensuring that we lift up the bonnet, as it were, and find out where the process is not working. It cannot be right that people have to wait three to five years for an appointment at a gender identity clinic, let alone then wait to go through any form of surgical intervention, if that is what they choose to do, or wait for mental health support or access to hormones from GPs. It cannot be right that we have some GPs refusing to issue hormones on the NHS because of what they believe to be concerns. Those are some of the issues that we can address.

We may not be able to agree on a fundamental reform of the GRA down to what is known as self-identification—many Members have talked about how that is a misnomer and how people do not understand what it means. However, to make the whole process kinder and gentler, and more supportive and patient-led—I hate the word “patient” as well; or client-led, or whatever term we use—it needs to put the trans person at the heart of getting this right. That is one of the things that I am committed to getting right, as much as I possibly can.

Dame Angela Eagle: I thank the Minister for giving way on that point, and I agree with his approach of using kindness. The Government have said that they will not take away the requirement for a diagnosis of gender dysphoria—a mental illness—given by two doctors. How on earth, given what he has said today, can that be a kind process?

Mike Freer: I think the hon. Lady jumped to the bottom of the page, because the Government recognise that the reference to “disorder” in the Act is outdated and dehumanising, and it will be removed.

I want to ensure that we remember the people involved. Many Members have talked about the people who are impacted by our debate, and again the conversation has become too toxic. Bizarrely, I have been described as a misogynistic self-hating gay because I support trans rights. The ability to have a rational conversation about some of these issues has passed too many people by. We have a responsibility to ensure that we make our decisions based on fact.

I am sorry that I am digressing, but I do feel quite passionately. I must correct this completely wrong view that a trans woman can be placed in a prison of her choice. That is simply not true. Three years ago, the Ministry of Justice changed the rules, and now a prisoner will be placed in the estate that is most suited to their position—what their status is on the transition journey, their treatment and what their physicality is like. It is not just simply: “Hello, I’m a woman and I’d like to be in a woman’s prison, please.” That simply is not true. It is important not to minimise the concerns that people have about what has happened in the past, but it is equally right that we make sure that we base our arguments on fact.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I welcome what my hon. Friend has just said, but is not the critical point that the Ministry of Justice has a framework in place for risk assessing each individual who identifies as the opposite gender? By using that risk assessment tool, people can be allocated to the correct prison that suits their needs and the needs of their fellow prisoners. Does that not get to the heart of what we really ought to be getting to here, which is for service providers to have sensible policies to manage any inherent tension in what they are delivering?

Mike Freer: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I will perhaps come on to some of the guidance in a few minutes. However, I wanted to put on the record that some of what is misinterpreted as going on in prisons simply does not occur. The rules have changed, I think three years ago. For reference, I refer colleagues to the answer given at the last Women and Equalities questions by the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge).

To return the previous point, we are taking steps to amend a specific reference to “disorder” in the Act via a remedial order as soon as possible. In my view, trans people deserve the dignity of being known as their true selves, which for some will include a very personal decision of accessing a robust legal gender recognition certificate system.

It is important to remember that changing legal sex is only one part of the picture. Trans people can and do go about their daily lives as their true selves, including with

documents that match their acquired gender, without needing to apply for a GRC. For some, a GRC will be a necessary next step—if they wish to get married in their acquired gender, for example—but that will not be the route for everyone. We often get caught up in focusing on the Gender Recognition Act.

On the subject of the GRA, the 2018 consultation was extensive and it received more than 100,000 responses. We looked carefully at all the issues raised in the consultation. It remains the Government’s view now, as in September 2020 when we responded formally to the consultation, that the balance struck in the legislation is correct: the system provides proper checks and balances, while supporting people who want to change their legal sex. The system is sound. The system is robust. It works in a balanced way for all parties. But that does not mean—as I said at the outset—that we cannot work on ensuring that the process, with all the issues that many Members have raised, is addressed and resolved. That does not mean that we are not working to make things better.

The system can be streamlined to make it more straightforward. People have poked fun about the cost being reduced, but that was an important step. It was something we were able to do quickly because it did not require primary legislation. Members commented on the digitisation process, and all our feedback from beta testing—that is where it is, at the beta testing phase—is that the process is much improved and that those who have used it found it more straightforward and helpful.

I accept, however, the views of Members about the intrusive nature of the information that might have to be required for a panel. I will take that away and look at exactly what has to be provided to see whether it is still relevant. As with many things in Government, we tend to bolt things on and rarely take them away. Perhaps it is time to look at what we are asking for and to see whether it is still relevant.

Numerous Members commented on spousal veto. We will address many of the issues raised today in the formal response to the Women and Equalities Committee report. That response will be published shortly. I understand, however, that the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020, which is to come into effect imminently, will remove what is known as spousal veto. I am sure that, if I have got that wrong, officials will quickly give me a kicking.

I turn to single-sex spaces. I assure colleagues that we will not be changing the Equality Act. For many years, trans people have used single-sex spaces in their gender without issue. The Government have no interest in curtailing that. It is also important that we maintain existing provisions that allow organisations to provide single-sex spaces. The Equality Act already allows service providers to restrict access to services on the basis of sex and gender reassignment, where that is justified.

A lot of media attention has been given to the Equality and Human Rights Commission and its work to provide clarity to service providers on the provision of single-sex services, which has long been called for. My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington said that it might be time to ensure that there is more clarity about what the Equality Act allows. I have spoken to the chair of the EHRC. We had a fruitful, if frank, conversation about how we are not seeking to change the Act, while recognising that for some people—as many have said

today—clarity about its provisions might be welcomed. The EHRC is of course independent of the Government, which the Equality Act 2006 provides for. However, I am happy to reiterate our commitment to maintaining the existing provisions under the Equality Act 2010.

I will now turn to some wider issues that impact on the LGBT community. Trans lives are impacted not just by legal recognition. I know from my conversations with trans people and organisations that more needs to be done to improve the health and safety of trans people. Since I took up this role, I have gone out of my way to engage with stakeholders in the trans community and I saw for myself, when I visited CliniQ and met service users and the dedicated staff and volunteers, exactly the level of support that is needed and provided by the amazing team of clinicians and volunteers.

As numerous Members have said and as far as I am aware, no one in this Chamber is a trans person and therefore we cannot speak from personal experience. It was important in my role to ensure that I heard from trans people themselves. However, I also want to put on the record my personal commitment that the proposals in the Conversion Therapy (Prohibition) Bill—I realise we may have some differences to overcome on particular provisions—will include protecting the trans community.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving way. He said that there are no trans Members of Parliament, which is absolutely the case. Nevertheless, it is great that we are having this debate and raising these issues. There are children of MPs who are trans and also non-binary. I wanted to make that point, to ensure that they are heard and so that people can be confident and feel that they have the support of this Parliament.

Mike Freer: I appreciate that the hon. Lady was not here for the bulk of the debate, but I am very conscious that some Members have trans children and trans siblings. I know from my own experience in the debate about equal marriage that what changed the whole tone of that debate was MPs standing up in the main Chamber and talking about their personal experiences as a gay man or as a lesbian woman, unable to get married. However, it is a very personal decision for a Member to stand up and talk about their personal life; some people are comfortable doing it and some people are not.

So although I firmly recognise that many Members, many members of staff and many House officials will have trans siblings and trans children, it must be the individual's decision whether they come forward to help change the debate. I urge them to do so; I would love them to do so, because it changes the whole tone of a debate when people can visualise and personalise, rather than hearing some abstract policy about what a trans person might be. However, that is a very personal decision.

I accept all the criticisms that I have heard today that we have not always got the tone right. That is absolutely true. I am sorry if I get a thick ear from some of my ministerial colleagues for saying so, but it is true that we have not always got the tone right. This is sometimes an emotive issue where we sometimes get it wrong. However, I can tell Members that the Secretary of State is absolutely committed to ensuring that trans rights are firmly embedded

in our programme. That is why I and Lord Herbert of South Downs have joined the team, and it is also why we have Iain Anderson as the LGBT+ business adviser.

An amazing addition to our team and the work we do is Dr Michael Brady, as national adviser for LGBT health. If anyone has in any doubt as to what we need to do, they should spend time with Dr Brady and go to the clinics that he works in, because the work that he and his team do is truly amazing. If anyone has any doubts, any fears or any worries about what the trans community are, they should go and see for themselves, and talk to Dr Brady and his team.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I will bring the Minister back to a point he made earlier, when he said the Government would remove the gender dysphoria language. Can he give a bit more explanation, based on the advice that he is getting from Dr Brady and others, about what they will replace that language with concretely? Will it just be a different word, or will there be a slightly different process that trans people will need to go through with their doctors? Will those doctors only be specialists, or will there be an ability for people to go to general practitioners and so on? Answering those questions might provide some movement that would be welcome.

Mike Freer: The hon. Gentleman asks quite a complex question, so, as he would expect, I do not have the answer now, but I will write to him. I can say that the word “disorder” will be removed; regarding exactly what it will be replaced with and how that will be implemented, I will write to him to give a full answer.

I will just mention the issue about some of the processes we have talked about. On trans health, progress is being made on adult gender identity services. Five pilots in a variety of settings have been developed, and these will be evaluated to give an insight on improving delivery. As I said at the outset, the fact that people have to wait three to five years to access services is simply unacceptable, and we are committed to ensuring that the whole client/patient—whatever term we want to use—process is streamlined and made faster, more effective and client-led.

Kirsty Blackman: In Scotland, we have committed to bringing gender identity healthcare into line with national waiting time standards, which we have put in place. I know it is slightly outside his remit, but will the Minister consider bringing in waiting time standards for healthcare?

Mike Freer: I am in the enviable position of being able to promise lots because I do not actually have to deliver it—I am not the Health Minister. I can commit to having conversations with colleagues across Government to deliver all the changes in the bits of Government and processes that impact LGBT people. That issue is firmly on my agenda, and I will take away that specific request and discuss it with my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care.

The issue of under-18s is often where people have the most concern, but I want to stress that it is the Government's view that the under-18s are properly supported in line with their age and decision-making capabilities. That is why Dr Hilary Cass is leading an independent review into gender identity services for children and young people. We will receive the interim recommendations soon. I have met Dr Cass and her team to discuss their

[Mike Freer]

work, which is rightly independent of Government. I believe that many concerns that Members and the public have about services for under-18s, which are firmly an NHS responsibility, will be addressed by the interim report by Dr Cass.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I wonder if it is the Minister's opinion that older teenagers under the age of 18 have the capacity to guide their own pathways—just as with the Gillick responsibility.

Mike Freer: The decision-making rules on under-18s will remain as they are. That decision making has to be informed by the client, clinician and the wider support framework, and all parties must have a voice.

To conclude, discussion around the previous consultation has been, rightly, intense, and issues raised today are fraught. The shadow Minister called it a Gordian knot, and I think we will struggle to address some of the issues. However, I share her view that we actually agree on many issues. With a lot of good will, we can address many of the issues that have been raised today. We have to remember who we are doing this for. It is to ensure that the trans community are supported with kindness, which is a word that I hate, because it sounds patronising, but the trans community must be supported as they go through what is an incredibly difficult process.

Luke Pollard: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way so late in his speech. I wonder if he could briefly mention non-binary people. It is a part of the debate, and has been discussed so far, but often non-binary people are erased in debates by virtue of being forgotten. Could the Minister remember them in his final words in the debate?

Mike Freer: I am aware of the issue and it is something I am working on with officials, but I cannot give any specific commitments today. I can, however, tell the House that the team and I are committed to ensuring that LGBT people can live their lives as safely and freely as they wish, with respect and dignity. I intend to do all I can to address the issues that are making the process and their lives difficult, cumbersome or bureaucratic.

These are emotive issues. I thank all colleagues for their contributions today. Although it is a subject that sometimes generates more heat than light, the way in which this debate has been conducted has proved that we can put our minds together and address some very difficult issues.

7.25 pm

Elliot Colburn: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I join the Minister in thanking colleagues across the House and on both sides of the discussion for their participation today, and particularly for having the bravery to come to this Chamber and speak on this topic. I would be shocked—I am prepared to bet with any Member in or outside of this room—if every single person who has contributed today, on either side of the debate, does not receive abuse. That is appalling and a shame.

I agree with the Minister that today we have managed to conduct ourselves better, frankly, than I expected—[*Interruption.*] It's true. As I said in my opening speech,

when the Petitions Committee was presented with this petition and tasked with scheduling it for debate, the look of fear on colleagues' faces as we were deciding who would take it forward was genuine. I do not make light of that, but I am glad that we have managed to come to this position and have this conversation. I particularly welcome that it is this Minister who is in his place today, as I do not doubt his personal commitment to the issue one iota, and he has spoken incredibly well. I really feel that he is someone with whom we can have real and genuine conversations on both sides of the issue, and be sure that our voices will be heard; I am grateful that he has come here to respond to the debate.

I was interested to hear that the Government intend to remove the words “gender dysphoria” from the requirements set out in the Act.

Mike Freer: “Disorder”.

Elliot Colburn: Yes, sorry. I appreciate that the Minister cannot give any more details here, but he knows my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, as well as I do, and I am sure that he will definitely be asked to come back to the Committee to give more details on that point.

The Minister also mentioned that the spousal veto will be removed in a divorce measure. That just leaves living in the acquired gender for two years as the last bit of the equation. It sounds as if the Government are already moving in the direction that the petition is asking them to. I know that we will want to flesh out some of the detail in the Women and Equalities Committee and in Women and Equalities questions, but if the Government are already minded to remove the words “gender dysphoria” and the spousal veto, that just leaves living in the acquired gender for two years.

Mike Freer: I need to correct my hon. Friend. It is “disorder” that will be removed.

Elliot Colburn: I thank the Minister for that clarification. I look forward to having more discussions with him on that in the Women and Equalities Committee.

I reiterate what everyone has said throughout the debate: we have to remember that at the heart of this matter are people who are just trying to live their everyday lives. If we can conduct ourselves with the respect and tolerance that we are showing each other in this room today, we can successfully take the heat out of the debate, have those discussions with one another and find those answers, because they are there and they are fixable. I am sure that this will be the first of many conversations. I thank all Members for coming today; it is one of the most well attended Petitions Committee debates that I have taken part in, and that can give us faith in the petitions system.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 327108, relating to reform of the Gender Recognition Act.

7.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 21 February 2022

TREASURY

Treasury Update

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

Collective money purchase pension schemes, which are also known as collective defined contribution pension schemes, are a new style of pension scheme. Contributions into the scheme are pooled and invested with a view to delivering an aspired level or benefit at a fixed cost, and without guarantees. The framework for these schemes was set out in the Pension Schemes Act 2021 and the tax regime was set out in the Finance Act 2021.

The Government's policy intention has always been that payments made from a collective money purchase pension scheme in wind-up should be treated as authorised payments. Following the publication of the draft Occupational Pension Schemes (Collective Money Purchase Schemes) Regulations 2022, the Government are aware of two instances where there is some uncertainty about how benefits from such a scheme would be treated in tax terms, should it ultimately become necessary to wind it up.

The first is about whether a member of such a scheme which is winding up can designate their funds into drawdown before transferring to another scheme. The Government can confirm that the policy intent here remains that this would be an authorised payment.

The second is whether such a scheme, in winding up, could pay a member a periodic income as an authorised payment. Here, too, the Government confirm that the policy intent continues to be that this would be available as an authorised payment.

This statement reconfirms that the original policy has not changed following the publication of the regulations and sets out the Government's commitment to ensuring that this policy intent is delivered, including by pursuing further legislative change where necessary. Tax guidance and any necessary draft clauses for tax legislation will be published in due course as part of the usual tax policy-making process.

[HCWS615]

DEFENCE

Defence Equipment Plan

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin):

I am pleased to place in the Library of the House a copy of the 2021 Defence Equipment Plan Report, which sets out our plans to deliver the equipment needed by our armed forces to defend the country and protect our national interest.

This year's equipment plan report is one of the most important in recent years as it implements the strategy and financial reset provided by the integrated review, the defence Command Paper and the spending review. The integrated review outlined the evolving nature of the threats we face. This equipment plan sets out how our military capability will evolve to meet these threats within an affordable financial envelope.

This equipment plan sets out how we are funding the capabilities we need, including more ships for the Royal Navy, a new batch of F-35s, a new medium helicopter and a major upgrade to our land equipment. This represents a significant enhancement on last year's capability plans while, through additional investment and tough prioritisation, we have reversed the £7.3 billion pressure on the plan outlined last year to a surplus.

This year is the first since 2018 when we have entered a new financial year with a funded contingency for the equipment plan. We have funding set aside to deal with urgent operational requirements and funding set aside for future research and development and its exploitation. We have made good progress in the first year of delivery end for the first time in many years, we expect to live within budget without Ministers having to take decisions on savings measures in year or running central savings exercises.

This has been possible by setting a clear vision for the armed forces through last year's integrated review and defence Command Paper, which has allowed us to retire less relevant equipment and refocus our programme on the kit we need for the future. We are making progress on delivering this change, including cancelling the Warrior sustainment programme and setting out plans for a more high-tech and agile Army as set out in our recent Future Soldier publication. This equipment plan relies on fewer low confidence efficiency measures than in previous years and our plans to reduce costs are supported by significant investments in acquisition, support and digital programmes to improve the way the Department operates.

We have, alongside capability investments, reversed the decline in defence R and D spend with a £6.6 billion ringfenced commitment. This will help reduce the risks associated with identifying and bringing into development the game-changing future capabilities we will need to meet the future threat.

However, delivering state of the art defence capabilities carries inherent risk. On a plan of this scale and over this timeline there will always be risks to affordability. We are clear-eyed on those risks and set them out in our report. As the National Audit Office have said, the MOD is responsible for some of the most technically complex, risky and costly procurement programmes in government. New, large and complex programmes like the Future Combat Air System, which will deliver the next generation of combat air capability, and the replacement warhead, which will allow us to renew the UK's nuclear deterrent, are extraordinarily complex endeavours. We continue to carry out and publish our own independent challenge of costings to help us understand and mitigate financial risk. Excluding Dreadnought, which has its own contingency funding, the risk identified in programmes which were reviewed both last year and this reduced by £0.3 billion, showing an improvement in the Department's costing and

management of risk. However, additional risk inevitably arises from new programmes entering the plan, including the warhead programme.

Planning over 10 years is inherently uncertain and we must be able to respond to changing threats and project-specific circumstances. As challenges emerge on programmes which delay expenditure, we will be flexible in accelerating other programmes to maintain momentum and where possible reduce cost. The HM Treasury £10 billion contingency for Dreadnought shields the rest of the equipment plan from changes in annual spend on our largest and most complex programme. We continue to reduce risk through the forward purchase of foreign currency.

New funding has enabled key decisions to be taken and priorities set but this alone is not enough to deliver on time and to budget. Having the right skills, tools, data and processes are critical. The Department has made real progress, which we set out in our report, but we recognise there is more to do. To deliver value for money for the taxpayer we have invested in our acquisition reform programme which aims to improve the speed and agility of our procurement processes and we are working to improve the capability and availability of senior responsible owners for programmes.

The nature of defence means that the plan is not without risks to which we will be agile in responding, however, new funding, a clear vision and a balanced plan mean that this is a very different programme to those of recent years.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2022-02-21/HCWS611>.

[HCWS611]

EDUCATION

Education Update

The Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): Today, I would like to set out what the Government's 'Living with covid-19' strategy means for education and childcare settings. As we move towards the endemic stage of covid-19, it is right that we empower people to make sensible decisions and trust in our fellow Britons to be sensible and look out for each other.

As of 21 February, all staff, students and pupils of secondary age and above in mainstream education and childcare settings are no longer advised to continue regular twice-weekly testing. This change is in line with the very latest public health advice, and because we now know that the risk of severe illness from covid-19 for most children, young people and fully vaccinated adults is much reduced.

Staff and students of secondary age and above in SEND settings, Alternative Provision settings, and SEND units within mainstream settings or equivalent in FE colleges are advised to continue twice-weekly testing. Staff in residential units in Children's Social Care (Open and Secure Children's Homes) and children of secondary age and above in Open Children's Homes are also advised

to continue twice-weekly testing. Children and young people arriving in Secure Children's Homes should test on arrival.

The education testing delivery channels will remain open so that staff and students of secondary age and above can access tests if needed to respond to local public health advice, in particular in relation to outbreaks. Staff and students are also able to access test kits from their local pharmacy or via www.gov.uk.

Mainstream settings will be advised to use any remaining stock of test kits to ensure access for students and their workforce in response to an outbreak if advised to do so by their local health protection teams.

From 24 February, the Government will remove the legal requirement to self-isolate following a positive test. Adults and children who test positive will continue to be advised to stay at home and avoid contact with other people for at least five full days, and then to continue to follow the guidance until they have received two negative test results on consecutive days. In addition, the Government will:

- No longer ask fully vaccinated close contacts and those aged under 18 to test daily for seven days, and remove the legal requirement for close contacts who are not fully vaccinated to self-isolate.

- End self-isolation support payments and national funding for practical support, and the medicine delivery service will no longer be available.

- End routine contact tracing. Contacts will no longer be required to self-isolate or advised to take daily tests. Staff, children and young people should attend their education settings as usual. This includes staff who have been in close contact within their household, unless they are able to work from home.

- End the legal obligation for individuals to tell their employers when they are required to self-isolate.

As part of the Government's decision in January 2022 to move back to Plan A, face coverings are no longer recommended in classrooms, teaching spaces and communal areas. Directors of Public Health may recommend temporarily re-introducing precautionary measures such as face coverings or testing in individual settings or across an area, informing my Department of their intention to do so to ensure any extra measures are proportionate.

We have now exceeded our public commitment to deliver 300,000 CO₂ monitors, with over 360,000 monitors delivered in the autumn term. We are also making up to 9,000 air cleaning devices available to all of those settings that need them. Over 6,000 have already been successfully delivered to eligible settings; the majority of the remaining deliveries will be completed by the end of February. And we continue to share advice and best practice on how settings can ensure that their occupied spaces are adequately ventilated, including a short video clip we recently filmed with Professor Cath Noakes, Professor of Environmental Engineering for Buildings.

From my previous role as vaccines Minister, overseeing one of the fastest roll outs in Europe, I know the importance of the vaccination programme in the fight against covid-19. Vaccinations remain our very best line of defence and I continue to encourage all eligible staff and students aged 12 and over to take up the offer of a vaccine to protect themselves and those around them. The recent extension of the programme to all five to 11-year-olds will enable all school-aged children to be vaccinated. The NHS will prepare to extend this non-urgent offer to all children during April so parents can, if they

want, take up the offer to increase protection against potential future waves of covid-19 as we learn to live with this virus. This group will be offered two 10 microgram doses of the Pfizer vaccine eight weeks apart—a third of the amount used for adult vaccinations. The Government have also announced today that we have accepted the advice from the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation to offer, from spring, an additional covid-19 booster jab to people aged 75 years and over, residents in care homes for older adults, and people aged 12 years and over who are immunosuppressed.

Vaccines are critical as a first line of defence, and antivirals now form a vital part of our approach as we learn to live with covid-19 by preventing the most vulnerable from being hospitalised. The Government have therefore agreed deals to secure a total of 4.98 million patient courses of oral antiviral treatments in our efforts to reduce the impact of covid-19 and the Omicron variant across the UK.

While we make this shift to living with covid-19, we know that education and childcare settings may continue to experience workforce pressures. To help with this, the covid-19 workforce fund has now been extended, providing financial support to eligible schools and colleges for costs incurred due to staff absences from Monday 22 November 2021 until Friday 8 April 2022. The fund is available to support schools and colleges facing significant staffing and funding pressures in continuing to deliver high-quality face-to-face education to all pupils.

Updated guidance for all education and childcare settings will be published in line with the implementation of the 'Living with covid-19' plan.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the incredible efforts of the education and childcare settings who have continued to provide provision and support to children and young people throughout the pandemic.

[HCWS616]

Political Impartiality in Schools

The Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): Last week, the Department for Education published non-statutory guidance on schools' legal duties on political impartiality, as set out in sections 406 and 407 of the Education Act 1996, part 2 of the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 and many academies' funding agreements.

These requirements have applied to schools for many years, and most schools are experienced in meeting them. However, the Government are aware that a number of recent issues have raised concerns and have made some teachers less confident to apply them in practice. Therefore, we have developed this guidance, working with the sector to ensure it is comprehensive and helpful.

Teaching about complicated and sensitive political issues can be challenging, but it is important that teachers can cover the full range of political issues they need to with confidence. The guidance is clear that it is not seeking to limit the range of political issues and viewpoints schools can and do teach about.

It is important that children are supported in their education to understand a range of perspectives and form their own views, without being unduly influenced by the personal views of those teaching.

This is what helps children and young people go on to become active citizens who can engage in our democratic society and who have an understanding and respect for legitimate differences of opinion.

This guidance will offer assurance to most schools that their legal duties in this area are being met without issue and help them continue their good work. For other schools the guidance should help them put in place the necessary processes to ensure adherence going forward.

Importantly, this guidance should also help all parties—including parents, carers, and others—to understand how schools should go about meeting their legal duties, allowing issues around impartiality to be taken seriously and resolved calmly through dialogue.

[HCWS613]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Tier 1 (Investor) Route

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): On Thursday 17 February 2022, I laid before the House a statement of changes in the Immigration Rules, which closed the Tier 1 (Investor) route to new applications with immediate effect.

The Government have taken this step because it is no longer clear the Tier 1 (Investor) route offers the best means of encouraging investment-related migration to the United Kingdom, and it is considered that reforms to the existing innovator route offer a better means of making more targeted provision for investment-related migration and reducing the risk of exposure of the immigration system to illicit finance and hostile state actors.

The closure of the Tier 1 (Investor) route had immediate effect for operational reasons and to preserve the integrity of the immigration system. It is our assessment that were the route not closed with immediate effect, closure of the route would prompt a large number of applications, with a risk that closure would particularly attract applications from those most motivated to exploit the current arrangements before they end, whether they are those who may not comply with the requirements of the immigration rules or those who may pose national security risks.

The statement of changes does not affect the position of those who have already obtained a permission under the route, and who may wish to seek an extension of stay or apply for settlement under the current arrangements.

The Tier 1 (Investor) route has provided a route of entry and stay for overseas nationals with access to a minimum level of funds and an intention to invest those funds in the United Kingdom, without testing the economic benefit to the United Kingdom of that investment or the track record of the individual as an investor. The overall conclusion of the Migration Advisory Committee's assessment of the route was that it primarily benefits the investors rather than the UK.

The operation of the route has facilitated the presence of persons relying on funds that have been obtained illicitly or who represent a wider security risk. In addition, the route has been compromised by organised abuse of its requirements through bogus investments schemes.

These concerns have been highlighted, for example, in the findings of the Intelligence and Security Committee's Russia report in relation to the scheme, as well as the recent Chatham House report on money laundering.

In response to these concerns, the Government have previously committed to publishing a review of historical issuance of visas under this route. That review is being finalised and it is our aim to publish it in the near future.

The Government have concluded that arrangements for attracting investment in the migration system warrant a substantively different approach to what has gone before. It is therefore our intention that new provision for investment-related migration should be delivered through reforms to the existing Innovator route, which we expect to deliver in the autumn of this year. This reformed offer will make provision for overseas nationals who can show they are skilled and experienced professional business angel investors, with a track record of founding and investing in innovative businesses overseas, along with access to a minimum level of funds and credible plans to engage in similar activity in the UK.

The proposed future scheme will no longer focus exclusively on having cash in the bank and making passive investments. It will instead be focused on attracting the brightest and best through a rigorous assessment of an applicant's business background, skills and investment plans. This will ensure those given a visa are appropriate individuals who will genuinely bring tangible benefits to the UK economy. Settlement will be conditional on applicants achieving genuine and tangible economic impacts, such as job creation, directly through their economic activity in the UK. They will ensure the British public can have confidence that those who obtain this significant privilege have genuinely earned it, rather than having bought it.

It will be for the reformed Innovator route's endorsing bodies to make an assessment of whether these criteria are met. The Government have already indicated that the selection of new endorsing bodies to support the operation of the Innovator route will be delivered through a commercial exercise. We are taking steps to inform the market that this expansion of the scope and purpose of the Innovator route will form part of the commercial requirement as we go to tender in the near future.

To be clear, these future arrangements will remain subject to Home Office security checks, alongside requiring appropriate checks by both the financial institutions handling applicants' funds and by the endorsing body, ensuring three levels of scrutiny of each application.

[HCWS614]

TRANSPORT

Transport for London Funding Settlement: Interim Extension

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): I am updating the House on an interim extension of the current Transport for London funding settlement that was due to expire on 18 February 2022 by one week to 25 February 2022. This was requested by TfL and has been accepted by Government.

Since the start of the pandemic, we have supported TfL with over £4.5 billion of funding through extraordinary funding settlements for Transport for London. We have recognised the reliance of London's transport network on fare revenue. We have recognised that demand and therefore passenger revenue has been volatile and have responded accordingly, compensating TfL for that revenue loss to ensure services can be maintained.

The Government are still committed to supporting London's transport network as we have since the start of the pandemic and they had offered TfL and the Mayor of London a fourth extraordinary funding agreement. TfL has asked for an extension of one week to allow the Mayor of London to consider the terms of the settlement letter and agree it with Government.

The Government are committed to supporting London and the transport network on which it depends, balancing that with supporting the national transport network. I will update the House on the details of the next financial settlement after the close of this extension period.

[HCWS610]

WORK AND PENSIONS

DWP Train and Progress: Expansion

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): The Government will be expanding the additional training flexibility element of DWP Train and Progress until April 2023.

DWP Train and Progress is a key policy initiative introduced in April 2021 that reinforces the importance of work coach engagement to identify and help address claimants' skills needs. It is part of the overall support offered to assist in meeting their work and career goals.

It mobilises our network of jobcentres to make best use of existing flexibilities within the universal credit system to deliver the skills interventions designed to help people move into work.

A core element of DWP Train and Progress is to enable universal credit claimants to access and participate in full-time work-related training opportunities for up to 16 weeks such as Department for Education funded skills bootcamps and the equivalent delivered by both the Scottish and Welsh Governments.

It is vital the Jobcentre Plus support offer includes the ability to enable claimants to enhance their existing skills or gain the new skills that local employers need. The recently announced Way to Work campaign will ensure eligible benefit claimants are rapidly supported to take on the many vacancies that remain unfilled in the wider labour market. The Government also recognise that for some claimants and some job roles additional upskilling will be necessary in order to enter and progress in sustained employment.

Through the current flexibilities, UC claimants have been able to access wave 1 of the £540 million Department for Education skills bootcamps and claimants will be able to learn skills in sectors such as construction, engineering, and logistics as roll-out continues.

[HCWS612]

Petitions

Monday 21 February 2022

OBSERVATIONS

ATTORNEY GENERAL

Death by dangerous driving

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Raihan Ahmed caused death by dangerous driving, drove without a licence or insurance and failed to stop at the scene of the crime; notes that the actions of Raihan Ahmed led to the loss of Ghulam Nabi's life; further that under his current sentence Ahmed could be out on the street in under two years whilst the family and community grieve for the rest of their lives; declares that a longer sentence will act as a greater deterrent to others.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to request that the Attorney General refer the unduly lenient sentence to the Court of Appeal.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Liam Byrne, Official Report, 08 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 532.]

[P002703]

Observations from the Solicitor General (Alex Chalk):

At the outset, we would like to convey our deepest sympathies to the family and friends of Ghulam Nabi.

The Attorney General and the Solicitor General have the power to refer unduly lenient sentences passed in respect of certain offences to the Court of Appeal for review. The Court of Appeal will only grant permission to refer a sentence in exceptional circumstances, for example if the judge has made some gross error, or has passed a sentence that falls outside the range of sentences which a judge, applying their mind to all the relevant factors, could reasonably consider appropriate. The bar to increasing a sentence is a very high one.

The offences which fall within the scheme are prescribed by Parliament in legislation. When offences do fall within the unduly lenient sentence scheme, any referral to the Court of Appeal must be made within 28 days. This is a strict time limit which cannot be extended.

The Attorney General's Office received a request to review this sentence on 11 November 2021. The Solicitor General carefully considered this case and concluded that there was no proper basis upon which a referral to the Court of Appeal could be sustained. The Solicitor General was mindful that the sentence was within the appropriate range prescribed in the applicable sentencing guideline. The offender was entitled to credit for his plea and this was properly applied by the judge. The Solicitor General appreciates that sentences deemed to be within a reasonable range from a legal perspective may not be considered appropriate by victims of crime or members of the public. However, the test for undue leniency is so strictly applied that it would have been wrong to refer this case after having concluded that the very high threshold for a referral had not been met.

TRANSPORT

Proposed spur between Aylesbury and Milton Keynes

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that, whilst welcoming the £760 million that the Government are investing in East-West Rail and the 1,500 jobs it will create, petitioners remain concerned that the funding announcement did not commit to the completion of the proposed spur between Aylesbury and Milton Keynes, which was originally conceived as part of the project; further that Aylesbury rail links consist only of a slow railway line to and from London and a single-track railway to and from Princes Risborough; further that if towns like Aylesbury are to both expand and to meet the net zero target of 2050 it is vital that the Government build sustainable transport links and improve connectivity; and further that excluding Aylesbury from the direct benefits of this project risks the town missing out on the levelling up of transport infrastructure and hampering potential economic growth.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider the concerns of petitioners and commit to the completion of the proposed spur between Aylesbury and Milton Keynes.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Rob Butler, Official Report, 1 February 2022; Vol. 708, c. 255.]

[P002708]

Observations from the Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton):

The Department for Transport is continuing to assess the business case for—and affordability of—delivering a spur of East-West Rail which would enable a rail connection from Aylesbury to Bletchley/Milton Keynes. This will need to take account of the impact of its 2021 Spending Review Settlement, as well as the need to understand the likely long-term demand for rail transport following the covid-19 pandemic.

Ministers will provide a more detailed update on the Aylesbury spur of East-West Rail when further decisions have been taken on the overall East-West Rail scheme.

Government are committed to investing in the Aylesbury area. This is demonstrated by the £12 million Government funding for the South East Aylesbury Link Road through the Local Growth Fund (LGF), and the £170 million from the Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) for the Aylesbury Garden Village. Both projects have substantial sustainable transport elements that will benefit the local area with cleaner cycling and walking projects. The Department for Transport is currently working closely with Buckinghamshire Council on these key schemes.

Ministers are committed to improving the sustainability of transport across the entire United Kingdom as a part of the plans to reach net-zero emissions by 2050. These include investing £2 billion in cycling and walking, with an ambition for half of all journeys in towns and cities to be cycled or walked by 2030; and investing £3 billion to deliver the National Bus Strategy to support the delivery of 4,000 new zero-emission buses and their supporting infrastructure.

Ministerial Corrections

Monday 21 February 2022

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Afghanistan Humanitarian Crisis: UK Response

The following are extracts from the urgent question on Afghanistan Humanitarian Crisis: UK Response on 9 February 2022.

Vicky Ford: As I said last month, we are also working to encourage the World Bank, as a matter of urgency, to repurpose the Afghanistan reconstruction trust fund, which would unlock a further \$1.5 billion. Indeed, I had discussions with my officials about that just this morning. *[Official Report, 9 February 2022, Vol. 708, c. 944.]*

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford).

An error has been identified in the response given to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell).

The correct response should have been:

Vicky Ford: As I said last month, we are also working to encourage the World Bank, as a matter of urgency, to repurpose the Afghanistan reconstruction trust fund, which would unlock a **total** \$1.5 billion. Indeed, I had discussions with my officials about that just this morning.

Vicky Ford: We are working with all the relevant partners—as I have said, the World Food Programme and the many other UN organisations—to make sure that the funding we are putting in is getting to where it is needed. That is supporting 4.4 million people at the moment, and as I have said, this will go up to 6.6 million when we include the support we are also putting in for health, water, protection, shelter and so on.

[Official Report, 9 February 2022, Vol. 708, c. 948.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford).

An error has been identified in the response given to the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams).

The correct response should have been:

Vicky Ford: We are working with all the relevant partners—as I have said, the World Food Programme and the many other UN organisations—to make sure that the funding we are putting in is getting to where it is needed. That is supporting 4.4 million people at the moment, and as I have said, this will go up to **6.1 million** when we include the support we are also putting in for health, water, protection, shelter and so on.

Vicky Ford: The funding we are giving is being channelled through many different organisations, including UN organisations such as the World Food Programme, and through the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs into local organisations too. My colleague, the noble Lord responsible for this area, meets them regularly to discuss any blockages in getting

the food there. It is a really challenging and heartbreaking situation—everybody understands that—and my colleague is meeting them regularly. That is the way this is currently being funded to make sure that the funding is going **not through Government or Taliban organisations**, but through those humanitarian aid organisations.

[Official Report, 9 February 2022, Vol. 708, c. 948.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford).

An error has been identified in the response given to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman).

The correct response should have been:

Vicky Ford: The funding we are giving is being channelled through many different organisations, including UN organisations such as the World Food Programme, and through the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs into local organisations too. My colleague, the noble Lord responsible for this area, meets them regularly to discuss any blockages in getting the food there. It is a really challenging and heartbreaking situation—everybody understands that—and my colleague is meeting them regularly. That is the way this is currently being funded to make sure that the funding is going **not through the Taliban**, but through those humanitarian aid organisations.

Vicky Ford: I completely agree that it is important to keep money flowing through the Afghan economy and, as I said, we are working with the World Bank on that. On 25 January—a couple of weeks ago—the UK also supported the Asian Development Bank with a £405 million support package for the Afghan people, funded from the Asian Development Fund.

[Official Report, 9 February 2022, Vol. 708, c. 951.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford).

An error has been identified in the response given to the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck).

The correct response should have been:

Vicky Ford: I completely agree that it is important to keep money flowing through the Afghan economy and, as I said, we are working with the World Bank on that. On 25 January—a couple of weeks ago—the UK also supported the Asian Development Bank with a **\$405 million** support package for the Afghan people, funded from the Asian Development Fund.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Dentist Industry and NHS Backlogs

The following is an extract from the Adjournment debate on the Dentist Industry and NHS Backlogs on 7 February 2022.

Maria Caulfield: 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...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.

[Official Report, 7 February 2022, Vol. 708, c. 778.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield).

Errors have been identified in my response to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter).

The correct response should have been:

Maria Caulfield: For **some** of last year, dental teams were **delivering** only up to 40% of normal activity. It was not until the end of last year that **the threshold went up** to 65%, and just around Christmas time that they were able to go up to 85% of normal activity. Even today, **many** are still not **able** 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...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 **there is no lower-level threshold**, and they **may not be** 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.

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Monday 28 February 2022**

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