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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 23 February 2022

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Sexual Offences

1. **Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What steps she is taking with the Home Secretary to tackle the potential causes of recent trends in the level of reported sexual offences. [905705]

10. **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): What steps she is taking with the Home Secretary to tackle the potential causes of recent trends in the level of reported sexual offences. [905715]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Rachel Maclean): We know that rape and sexual offences are still too often hidden crimes and we want to see more victims having the confidence to report. We have seen a large increase in police-recorded sexual offences. There is some good news in that, because it is likely to reflect victims having additional confidence to come forward to report in the wake of some high-profile cases and the reopening of the night-time economy. We are committed to doing everything we can to prevent these crimes and bring perpetrators to justice. That is why we have outlined, through our rape review, a robust plan of action to drive improvement at every stage of the criminal justice system.

Catherine West: One in 75 women who report rape see their case come to a conclusion and a conviction. What does the Minister say to women who say, “I haven’t had my case properly investigated, I haven’t had my day in court and the police are telling me there will be no further action—why don’t I just get my brothers and cousins to go round and sort him out?”? What does she say to people who are so desperate that they take the law into their own hands?

Rachel Maclean: I would never condone people taking the law into their own hands, and I am sure that the hon. Member agrees. However, we are aware that there are issues across the whole criminal justice system. On the Crown Prosecution Service and court system, we have opened ourselves up to transparency and our partners in the police forces and the CPS have said that they need to do more. To improve the rate of rape prosecutions, we have set ambitious asks of all our partners across the criminal justice system, and I will continue pushing that.

Andrew Gwynne: Labour Members believe it is time for judges to be able to hand out enhanced sentences and increased punishments for all crimes that are committed on the basis of prejudice against women, so why are the Government seeking to overturn our call to make misogyny a hate crime?

Rachel Maclean: I have had a number of questions on this topic this morning. The Government are considering the Law Commission’s proposals on this issue. That is sensible and right. I am sure that all hon. Members would agree that there is no point in our putting measures on the statute book that would have a harmful effect on prosecutions, but that is exactly what the Law Commission’s legal experts have suggested would happen. We are therefore not minded to make misogyny a hate crime, because that is not the way to tackle these systemic issues. We are determined to deal with violence against women and girls, but I am afraid that that is not the way to do it.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, Caroline Nokes.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Public sexual harassment is a gateway crime to some of the more serious sexual offences highlighted by my hon. Friend. She may not agree that misogyny should be a hate crime, but does she agree with the Law Commission that public sexual harassment should be a specific crime? Please can we see action to have it legislated for quickly rather than pushed into the long grass?

Rachel Maclean: My right hon. Friend is right that the Home Office is looking carefully at whether there should be additional offences. I draw her attention to the fact that a number of measures are already on the statute book. I encourage women and girls to come forward; in fact, we are producing and creating a high-profile national communications campaign across TV and all our broadcast systems to encourage exactly that. We want to stamp it out and for perpetrators to be tackled.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Women and girls who are victims of human trafficking suffer the most appalling sexual offences, yet in 2020 there were only 13 convictions for human trafficking. Today, I have published my private Member’s Bill—the Human Trafficking (Sentencing) Bill—which would require the Government to review the situation to ensure that more victims see the perpetrators behind bars. Given what the Minister has said, will she assure me that the Government will support my Bill on Friday?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for his consistent advocacy for the victims of some of these most appalling crimes. He and I have spoken in detail about the measures that the Government are already taking to protect women and girls. Through our modern slavery legislation, they are at the centre of our protective measures. We will put our arms around them. We are already supporting them through the national referral mechanism, and we should be proud of that work. We are leading the world in our support for victims of trafficking.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister’s awareness of problems with tackling sexual crimes is not good enough. We need action. Recording misogyny as a hate crime helps to “seek justice and get support for victims”.

It helps to

“build a picture of intelligence which informs policing plans,”

and it sends

“a powerful message that this behaviour is not acceptable and there will be consequences.”

Those are direct quotes from officers in the North Yorkshire police and Nottinghamshire’s chief constable. Can the Minister explain why the Government seem to disagree and are planning to overturn Labour’s amendment to make misogyny a hate crime?

Rachel Maclean: I am afraid the hon. Lady was not listening to the response I gave earlier. I was very clear that we do not seek, as responsible legislators, to put measures on the statute book that have a harmful effect. The experts at the Law Commission—*[Interruption.]* I wonder why she is shaking her head. I advise her to read its report in detail, which is clear that the Labour amendment she champions would make it harder for us to prosecute sexual offenders and rapists. We on the Government Benches would not like to see that taking place.

Anneliese Dodds: I have been listening: I have been listening to police forces, to their officers and to victims. That is why we support the amendment.

Next week marks a year since Sarah Everard’s kidnap and murder. That appalling case should have spurred action to tackle the epidemic of violence against women. Instead, sexual offences and rape have hit record highs, while prosecutions have fallen to record lows. We must treat this violence as seriously as we treat terrorism and organised crime. Will the Government make violence against women and girls a strategic policing requirement?

Rachel Maclean: I think there is a lot of agreement across the House, despite the tone with which the hon. Lady has spoken to me. Violence against women and girls and dealing with rape prosecutions is a priority, which is why we have allocated record sums to tackle those horrendous crimes. The measures she mentions are something we are looking at and we will come forward with more information shortly.

Gender Recognition

2. **Kate Osborne** (Jarrow) (Lab): If she will take steps with Cabinet colleagues to de-medicalise the process of obtaining a gender recognition certificate. [R] [905706]

The Minister for Equalities (Mike Freer): The Government are clear that we want transgender people to be able to live their lives as they wish. The previous Government consulted on the Gender Recognition Act 2004. Having listened to the full range of views expressed, we concluded that the balance currently struck in the legislation is correct. We therefore do not intend to change the requirements of the Act.

Kate Osborne: On Monday, the Minister for Equalities, the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) said the Government would remove the rule whereby a trans person’s spouse has to consent to their gaining a gender recognition certificate. Yesterday, that had changed to helping to avoid spousal consent issues. Can the Minister categorically confirm today that the Government will remove that veto power altogether?

Mike Freer: Yes, I did use the shorthand of spousal veto, which I know lawyers say does not exist. The no-fault divorce legislation about to be enacted will remove that effect that people are being asked to have removed. That is the advice I have received. If the hon. Lady says that the advice is wrong I will double-check it, but the advice I have received is that the new Act will remove that obstacle to divorce.

Social Mobility

3. **David Johnston** (Wantage) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve social mobility. [905707]

9. **Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve social mobility. [905714]

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): The Government believe the circumstances of one’s birth should not determine life outcomes. As part of our plan to increase opportunity, we recently published the levelling-up White Paper to address regional disparities, which is one of the key drivers of social mobility across the UK.

David Johnston: In the civil service’s most recent diversity data, there is data on all the protected characteristics but nothing on social background, which has historically been a problem in the civil service, particularly at senior levels. Will my hon. Friend look at that so that we know whether the civil service is open to all backgrounds and is making its own contribution to social mobility?

Kemi Badenoch: Social background is not a protected characteristic in the Equality Act 2010, but the civil service did begin implementing socio-economic background measures for its workforce in 2018. Many Departments collect that data, but declaration rates have not yet reached a sufficient threshold for publication. However, I understand that the Cabinet Office is working with Departments to increase declaration rates to enable publication in next year’s civil service statistics publication.

Robbie Moore: On a visit to Holy Family School in Keighley earlier this month, I was able to share the fantastic news that my constituency will become one of the Government’s key education investment areas. What role will my hon. Friend’s Department play to ensure that increasing social mobility is at the heart of plans, alongside the levelling-up White Paper, to transform the life chances of young people across Keighley?

Kemi Badenoch: I am delighted that my hon. Friend’s constituency will benefit from the Government’s education investment areas and will invest in areas where educational attainment is weakest. Important initiatives such as that will help us to spread opportunity and level up the country. Equality has an important role to play and my officials are working closely with Departments to encourage focused and evidence-based action.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): On social mobility, does the Minister appreciate that some are concerned about the proposals that would

mean that people would not have access to funding for tuition fees unless they meet certain grades at GCSE and A-level? Will that not impact more heavily on poorer families?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. The Department for Education will have done an equalities impact assessment on any new policies that it will announce. Those will be taken into account to make sure that people who are most at risk and most vulnerable are not prevented from taking up education in any way.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Children from poorer backgrounds are four times more likely to suffer a serious brain injury by their fifth birthday and again in their teenage years than children from wealthier backgrounds. That obviously limits their opportunities in life. What will the Government do about that?

Kemi Badenoch: I am afraid that I do not have an answer specifically on what we are doing on brain injuries, but I will get the relevant Minister to write to the hon. Member and provide the appropriate information.

Mr Speaker: That was a bit of a stretch, in fairness.

Hate Crime: Misogyny

4. **Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD):** What plans she has with the Home Secretary to bring forward legislative proposals to make misogyny a hate crime. [905709]

6. **Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD):** What plans she has with the Home Secretary to bring forward legislative proposals to make misogyny a hate crime. [905711]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Rachel Maclean): As I said, the Government currently have no plans to make misogyny a hate crime. The reason is that we have consulted the legal experts on that subject. The Law Commission concluded that the proposal could do more harm than good in our efforts to tackle violence against women and girls, and I am sure that the hon. Lady would not wish to see that happen.

Christine Jardine: I thank the Minister for that, but the reality is that more than 80% of 18 to 24-year-olds have already experienced sexual harassment in a public place. If the Government were to legislate, it would allow the police to act. Does she not agree that, more importantly, it would also send a message out to people across this country that misogyny, sexual harassment and bullying based on gender is unacceptable in every sector of life?

Rachel Maclean: No, I do not agree, and that is not what the Law Commission said. It said that that would be actively unhelpful and harmful to our efforts to tackle exactly the issues that the hon. Lady mentioned. I am afraid that I am at risk of repeating myself: we want to bring these perpetrators to justice and we are tackling this issue at the source. Making misogyny a

hate crime would make it more difficult to prosecute all forms of hate crime, including those related to race and ethnicity.

Sarah Green: I fear that I am going to ask the Minister to repeat herself, because the Government's response to persistent violence against women and girls has been to support the Path Community app, which asks women to protect themselves by sharing journeys home, and to launch StreetSafe, which asks women to report where they feel unsafe. That yet again puts the onus on women when they are not the problem. Last year, a study of sexual aggression in UK male university students found a correlation between misogynistic views and a proclivity for sexual violence against women. What message does it send that the Government's response to persistent violence against women is, "There's an app for that."? I urge the Minister, please, to tackle the root cause and work with the Home Office to make misogyny a hate crime.

Rachel Maclean: I refer to my previous remarks.

Women in the Workplace

5. **Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP):** What steps the Government are taking to support women in the workplace. [905710]

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): To support women in the workplace, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will extend redundancy protections after return from maternity leave and introduce neonatal leave and pay and one week of unpaid carer's leave. It has also recently consulted on measures to increase the availability of flexible working, and it looks forward to publishing its response to that in due course.

Stuart C. McDonald: We know that women face particular challenges in, for example, caring responsibilities and making progress in paid work, but rather than addressing that problem, the Government's Way to Work scheme will pressure people to take any job quickly rather than helping them to obtain good, sustainable jobs that they are qualified for. What discussions has the Minister had with colleagues at the Department for Work and Pensions about supporting women into good-quality, well-paid jobs and not just the first thing that turns up?

Kemi Badenoch: I am afraid that I disagree with the hon. Gentleman. As I have just heard from the Minister responsible—the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies)—individual circumstances are taken into account and we are doing the very best we can for women in the workplace.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Maternity Action has recently highlighted that

"over the past decade the value of the basic rate of maternity, paternity and parental pay has also declined relative to women's median weekly earnings, from 42% in 2012, to just 37% from April this year."

Of course, new parents now also face a Tory cost of living crisis. There is overwhelming evidence for the value of supporting the youngest members of our society and the families who care for them, so will the Minister urge her colleagues to match reality to the rhetoric, introduce the long-awaited employment Bill and take the steps necessary to support parental leave and pay to better support new parents?

Kemi Badenoch: The Government take the issue very seriously; I know that my colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy are working very hard on it. I expect that we will hear very much more on the matter shortly.

12. [905717] **Miriam Cates** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): The Equality and Human Rights Commission has an important role to play in supporting women in the workplace through its statutory duty to enforce the Equality Act 2010. What support are the Government giving the EHRC as it faces attacks from those who seek to undermine its independence?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my hon. Friend for that really important question. I have to say that I have been shocked by the really disgusting remarks that have been levelled at the chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission in particular. It is a disgrace that people are attacking the body that is supposed to be furthering equality in this country. No good can come of that.

I am sure that colleagues across the House share my desire for more people from minorities to take part in public life. That is one goal that we all share, but it is in jeopardy when the EHRC chair, an experienced parliamentarian from an ethnic and religious minority, can be subjected to vile, horrific personal abuse simply for encouraging others to comply with equality law. We support her. It is not healthy for our democracy for online smears and falsehoods, especially the ones that have been put forward by Vice News, repeated by those in the mainstream media who should know better, and deliberately designed to undermine public confidence in the independent regulator responsible—

Mr Speaker: Order.

ILO Convention 190

7. **Ian Lavery** (Wansbeck) (Lab): If she will take steps with Cabinet colleagues to ratify ILO convention 190 on violence and harassment in the world of work. [905712]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): The Government have made clear our intention to ratify International Labour Organisation convention 190 on violence and harassment. I am pleased to confirm that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions plans to deposit the signed instrument of ratification at the ILO in Geneva shortly.

Ian Lavery: Ratifying ILO convention 190 on workplace violence and harassment is a key demand of the new “Get me home safely” campaign led by Unite the union. It is also meant to be a key priority for this Government, but the Minister has simply said that there will be moves to sign the convention. There have been many, many

promises. What on earth is happening? Is there a seeming reluctance to accept ILO convention 190? Will the Minister get on and make sure that it is signed? There has been a huge increase in violence against women, particularly in the workplace.

Mims Davies: The UK already has the necessary legislation in place to implement the convention. We will be required to report on compliance to the ILO in due course. The visit to deposit the ratification has been delayed as a result of covid-19 and the omicron variant; we will achieve it at the soonest possible date.

Topical Questions

T1. [905719] **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): The appointment of Katharine Birbalsingh as chair of the Social Mobility Commission has been a welcome boost to the agenda. I would like to inform the House that she has begun the recruitment process for new social mobility commissioners to support her in delivering change. I look forward to meeting the new board when the process is complete. Its work will be critical to helping the Government to deliver our levelling-up agenda.

Jessica Morden: Under new rules introduced last month, out-of-work universal credit claimants have just four weeks to find work; the previous limit was three months. Given that women are more likely than men to claim universal credit, as Welsh charity Chwarae Teg has highlighted, will the Minister confirm what consideration, if any, was given to how women would be affected? Has a full equalities impact assessment been carried out?

Kemi Badenoch: I am reassured by one of my colleagues that that is not the case. Individual circumstances are taken into account. I am sure that if the hon. Lady writes to us, we shall be able to provide more details in order to correct the record.

T2. [905720] **Paul Maynard** (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): As the Minister will know, a hate crime occurs when a crime is committed and is aggravated by the victim's protected characteristic, yet in recent weeks we have seen the existence of a statue described as a hate crime, along with the sale of Midget Gems in a supermarket. Neither is a crime, let alone a hate crime. Does the Minister agree that trivialising such incidents and misrepresenting hate crime will make victims of disability hate crime less likely to report those crimes?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Rachel Maclean): I fully agree with my hon. Friend and would encourage all of us to choose our words wisely. It is important to remember that hate crime is a devastating and often violent crime, requiring evidence to be presented in court and proved to a criminal standard. I would encourage victims always to report such crimes.

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): Black, Asian and ethnic minority women face overwhelming health inequalities in our country, as has been revealed by the recent NHS Race & Health Observatory report. The Government promised us a comprehensive women's health strategy by the end of 2021, and they have broken that promise. Instead, we have had a vague vision document, and now a taskforce to increase understanding of the problem, but no concrete steps to solve it. The Conservatives have had 12 years in which to act. When are they going to do so?

Kemi Badenoch: I am afraid it is not the case that nothing has been done. I have been working very closely with Ministers across Departments, looking at the very issues the hon. Lady has raised. We did launch a women's health strategy in December, and more will be coming. She may not have noticed this, but on 23 December the Government published "Our Vision for the Women's Health Strategy for England", and there is far more detail to come. These are not issues on which we ever stop working, and I hope to be able to work with Members across the House to deliver on the strategy.

T5. [905723] Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I have a tragic case in my constituency. A 14-year-old girl was a victim of rape, and now her attacker has been allowed to live 120 metres away from her, causing her and her family intolerable distress. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the case, and will she work with me to ensure that victims can live safe in the knowledge that their abusers will never be allowed to live near them again, and that judges will prioritise the rights of victims over their attackers?

Rachel Maclean: I am of course appalled to hear of that tragic case, and either I or a Minister from the Ministry of Justice will be happy to meet my right hon. Friend. It is vital that we protect the public, particularly from sex offenders, which is why offenders on licence are subject to a number of conditions, including where they live and work.

T3. [905721] Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): We know that hate crime is often intersectional, especially in diverse constituencies such as mine. Many victims have more than one identity: they may be black, and they may also be LGBT women. However, the current legislation does not allow multiple characteristics to be recorded, so often the data lacks accuracy and depth. Will Ministers please work with us to address this, so that we can build a real picture of the people who are being targeted by hate crime?

The Minister for Equalities (Mike Freer): The hon. Lady raises a very interesting and important point. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities and I will work on this, and see what more we can do to address that specific issue.

T7. [905725] Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Shared parental leave was a brilliant idea, introduced by a Conservative Government, but there is one type of new parent who receives almost no support: the kinship carer of a baby. What can my hon. Friend do to ensure equality for all types of parenting?

Kemi Badenoch: The Government value the vital role that kinship carers play. Eligible kinship carers who adopt are entitled to adoption leave and pay, and employed kinship carers may also be eligible for other leave entitlements to balance work with caring, including emergency leave, the right to request flexible working, and unpaid parental leave. However, we will continue to look at this issue.

T4. [905722] Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): I want to share the words of one of my constituents with the House:

"I am emailing you because of the unfairness of people on legacy benefits who did not receive the extra £20 a week support because of Covid... This is discrimination of Disabled people which I am one of... I could not leave my home for nearly eighteen months because of Covid, this money would have helped with heating costs."

This month, Kamran Mallick, CEO of Disability Rights UK, said:

"With rising energy bills, increasing inflation and benefits pegged at a horrendously low level, millions of Disabled people are living in conditions comparable to the nineteenth century work house."

Can the Minister let me know—

Mr Speaker: Order. Sorry. I call the Minister.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): In relation to the challenge in the High Court to the Government's decision not to extend the universal credit uplift to those on legacy benefits during the pandemic, Mr Justice Swift said:

"My conclusion is that the difference in treatment...resulting from the 2020 Regulations was justified".

I would ask the hon. Gentleman's constituent to please use the benefits calculator on gov.uk and to talk to his work coach in case there is any support locally that he is missing out on.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Four in 10 young women in this country have received an unsolicited naked image of a man's genitals. This sort of abuse has absolutely no place in our society. Will my hon. Friend please ensure that this is made a sex offence in the online safety Bill?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my right hon. Friend for her consistent campaigning against this disgusting form of abuse against women and girls. I can do no more than refer to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who is sitting behind me and who has himself committed to introducing cyber-flashing as an offence as soon as possible.

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

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

1. [905689] David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 23 February.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): I can announce to the House that in the light of the increasingly threatening behaviour from Russia, and in line with our previous support, the UK will shortly be providing a further package of military support to Ukraine. This will include lethal aid in the form of defensive weapons and non-lethal aid.

I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in congratulating Team GB's curling teams for winning gold and silver medals at the winter Olympics.

I know that Members across the House will want to offer condolences to the family and friends of our former colleague Sir Richard Shepherd, who sadly died earlier this week. He served as the MP for Aldridge-Brownhills for 36 years.

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

David Johnston: By 2027, Didcot in my constituency will be 42% larger than it was a decade earlier; Wantage and Grove will be 59% larger. There are thousands more houses going up in Wallingford, Faringdon and all the villages I represent, but not a single new GP surgery. Does my right hon. Friend agree that where we build new houses, we have to build new infrastructure so that people can still access the services they need?

The Prime Minister: Yes, of course my hon. Friend is right. That is why we are making record investments in the NHS and in schools and roads—as we can, thanks to the strong growth in our economy. I will make sure that he gets a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss his immediate local concerns.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in his comments in relation to Sir Richard Shepherd. We all want to deter aggression in Europe. We are not dealing with breakaway republics, and Putin is not a peacekeeper; a sovereign nation has been invaded. The Prime Minister promised that in the event of an invasion, he would unleash a full package of sanctions. If not now, then when?

The Prime Minister: As I said, the UK has been out in front in offering military support to Ukraine, and I am grateful for what the right hon. and learned Gentleman said yesterday about the need to make sure we keep ammunition in reserve for what could be a protracted struggle over this issue.

Let the House be in no doubt about the extent of the package set out yesterday and about what we are already doing, because I do not think people quite realise that the UK is out in front. We have sanctioned 275 individuals already, and yesterday we announced measures that place banks worth £37 billion under sanctions, in addition to more oligarchs. There is more to come. We will be stopping Russia raising sovereign debt, and we will be stopping Russian companies raising money or, as I said yesterday, even clearing in sterling and dollars on international markets.

That will hit Putin where it hurts, but it is vital that, after this first barrage, we work in lockstep with friends and allies around the world to squeeze him simultaneously in London, Paris and New York. Unity is absolutely vital.

Keir Starmer: I hear what the Prime Minister says about sequencing and further sanctions, but there has already been an invasion. There is clearly concern across the House that his strategy could—unintentionally, I accept—send the wrong message. If the Prime Minister were now to bring forward his full package of sanctions, including excluding Russia from financial mechanisms such as SWIFT and a ban on trading in Russian sovereign debt, he will have the full support of the House. Will he do so?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for the general support that the Opposition have given not just to our economic sanctions but to the package of military support, which will intensify. We want to see de-escalation by Vladimir Putin. There is still hope that he will see sense, but we are ready to escalate our sanctions very rapidly, as I have set out.

Under the measures that this House has already approved, we can now target any Russian entity or individual. Not only can we already target the so-called breakaway republics in the oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk but we can target members of the Duma who voted to recognise them. This is the most far-reaching legislation of its kind, and I am glad that it has the right hon. and learned Gentleman's support.

Keir Starmer: It does have my support, and we will support it if it is used. We must also do more to defeat Putin's campaign of lies and disinformation. Russia Today is his personal propaganda tool. I can see no reason why it should be allowed to continue broadcasting in this country, so will the Prime Minister now ask Ofcom to review its licence?

The Prime Minister: I believe my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has already asked Ofcom to review that matter, but we live in a democracy and a country that believes in free speech. I think it is important that we leave it to Ofcom to decide which media organisations to ban, rather than politicians—that is what Russia does.

Keir Starmer: The request was for a review, and I am glad to hear that the review is now happening. *[Interruption.]* I will not be deflected from the unity that this House needs at the moment.

At the weekend, the Prime Minister said that if Russia invades Ukraine, he will “open up the matryoshka dolls” of Russian-owned companies and Russian-owned entities to find the ultimate beneficiaries within. Well, Russia has invaded and it is time to act. If he brings forward the required legislation to do this, he will have Labour's support. Will he commit to doing so in the coming days?

The Prime Minister: As I said, we are bringing forward in the next wave of sanctions measures that will stop all Russian banks, all oligarchs, all Russian individuals raising money on London markets. We are also accelerating the economic crime Bill, which will enable us in the UK to peel back the—*[Interruption.]* In the next Session. It will enable us to peel back the façade of beneficial ownership of property in the UK and of companies. It has gone on for far too long and this Government are going to tackle it. But on all these measures it is very important that the House remembers that they

are more effective when all financial centres move forward together, and that is what the UK has been organising.

Keir Starmer: I think I heard the Prime Minister say that the economic crime Bill will be in the next Session, but I hope I misheard that. I can assure him that if he brings it forward in this Session, in the coming days, it will have our support. There is no reason to delay this.

Let me turn to the Elections Bill. As it stands, the Bill would allow unfettered donations from overseas to be made to UK political parties from shell companies and individuals with no connections to the UK. Labour has proposed amendments that would protect our democracy from the flood of foreign money drowning our politics. We can all now see how serious this is, so will the Prime Minister now change course and support these measures in the House of Lords?

The Prime Minister: We have very tough laws—tough rules—in this country to stop foreign donations. We do not accept foreign donations; people have to be on the UK electoral register in order to give to a UK political party. Before the right hon. and learned Gentleman starts chucking it around, I just remind him that the largest single corporate donation to the Labour party came from a member of the Chinese communist party. *[Interruption.]*

Keir Starmer: No, Mr Speaker, at this moment, as the House agreed yesterday, we have to stand united, and I am not going to be deflected from that. I note that the Prime Minister did not agree to change the Elections Bill. I think that is a mistake, and I ask him to take it away and look at those amendments in the Lords again. Putin has invaded a sovereign European nation. He has attacked because he fears openness and democracy, and because he knows that, given a choice, people will not choose to live under erratic, violent rule. He seeks division, so we must stay united. He hopes for inaction, so we must take a stand. He believes that we are too corrupted to do the right thing, so we must prove him wrong, and I believe we can. So will the Prime Minister work across the House to ensure that this is the end of the era of oligarch impunity by saying that this House and this country will no longer be homes for their loot?

The Prime Minister: I do not think any Government could conceivably be doing more to root out corrupt Russian money, and that is what we are going to do. We can be proud of what we have already done and the measures we have set out. I am genuinely grateful for the tone of the right hon. and learned Gentleman's last question and for the support he has given. He is right to say that it is absolutely vital that we in the UK should stand united. People around the world can see that the UK was the first to call out what President Putin was doing in Ukraine. We have been instrumental in bringing the western world together in lockstep to deal with the problem—to bring together the economic package of sanctions that I have set out.

As I have said, there is still time for President Putin to de-escalate, but we must be in absolutely no doubt that what is at stake is not just the democracy of Ukraine, but the principle of democracy around the world. That is why the unity of this House is so important today. It

is absolutely vital that the United Kingdom stands together against aggression in Ukraine, and I am grateful for the broad support that we have had today from the Leader of the Opposition.

2. [905690] **Mark Eastwood** (Dewsbury) (Con): Following last week's Q&A at the Shepley Village Association, and after receiving a huge number of complaints from constituents, it is clear to me that speeding is a major problem not just in Shepley, but across all parts of Dewsbury, Mirfield, Kirkburton and Denby Dale. Does my right hon. Friend agree that rather than action being taken after people have been killed or seriously injured in collisions, prevention is better than cure and the Department for Transport circular 2007 needs a long overdue review?

The Prime Minister: Yes. As a cyclist, I share my hon. Friend's passion on this issue. We do need to crack down on speeding, which plays a role in excessive deaths on our roads. The Department for Transport is updating the circular on the use of speed and red-light cameras that my hon. Friend mentioned and I urge him to get in touch with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Yesterday, we on the SNP Benches made it clear that the SNP stands united against the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which needs to be met with tougher and stronger sanctions. As the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) rightly said, however, we should not be waiting for Russia to attack others before we clean up the corruption that Russian money has been fuelling in the UK.

Under the Tories, a sewer of dirty Russian money has been allowed to run through London for years. In 2017, I went to the Prime Minister when he was Foreign Secretary and raised the issue of limited partnerships, of which 113 have been used to move \$20.8 billion out of Russian banks—corruption on an industrial scale. Why did the Prime Minister do nothing back then, and why is he still doing nothing now?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman was right to come to me then—I have always enjoyed talking to him, as I have told him many times—and he is right on the issue. We do need to stop corrupt Russian money in London and every other financial capital. That is why we have already taken the steps we have taken, but we are going much further to uncloak the true owners of Russian companies and Russian properties in this country, and it is high time. No country is doing more than the UK to tackle this issue.

Ian Blackford: That meeting was five years ago, and I offered to work with the Prime Minister. Five years ago, and nothing has happened. The truth is that Russian oligarchs who give the right people in power a golden handshake have been welcomed into London for years. Their activities were not stopped; they were encouraged. Plenty of those golden handshakes just so happened to find their way into the coffers of the Conservative party—in fact, £2.3 million since the Prime Minister took office.

A leading American think-tank has publicly raised concerns that

“the close ties between Russian money and the United Kingdom’s ruling conservative party”

are a block to stronger sanctions. How can our allies trust this Prime Minister to clean up dirty Russian money in the UK when he will not even clean up his own political party? Will he finally commit to giving up the £2.3 million that his party has raised from Russian oligarchs?

The Prime Minister: I just think it is very important for the House to understand that we do not raise money from Russian oligarchs. People who give money to this—*[Interruption.]* We raise money from people who are registered to vote on the UK register of interests. That is how we do it. The right hon. Gentleman’s indignation is, I am afraid, a bit much coming from somebody whose very own Alex Salmond is a leading presenter, as far as I know, on Russia Today, which the Leader of the Opposition has just called on this country to ban.

4. [905692] **Sir Bill Wiggin** (North Herefordshire) (Con): The River Wye, pollution, flooding, house building and the wider environment are all important to my right hon. Friend, so will he meet me to discuss the future of the Environment Agency?

The Prime Minister: I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend—and I congratulate him on his recent elevation—but I must say that the Environment Agency faces many challenges and does an outstanding job of building flood defences. Some 314,000 homes are better protected since 2015 and we continue to invest massively to help them. I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Yesterday, when I asked the Prime Minister about Russian meddling in UK elections, he looked very shifty before claiming that he was not aware of any. Yet, when he was—*[Interruption.]* Yet, when he was Foreign Secretary in 2017, he appeared at a joint press conference with the Russian Foreign Minister. When Lavrov claimed that there was no evidence that Russia had interfered in UK elections in any way, the now Prime Minister corrected him by saying that there was no evidence of “successful” interference. Can the Prime Minister tell us what evidence he has seen of unsuccessful interference? Has he actually read the Russia report, which is very clear that there is credible evidence of interference? *[Interruption.]* Given that, as his Defence Secretary said earlier this week, information is as powerful as any tank, can he explain why he is turning a blind eye to allegations of Russian disruption—

Mr Speaker: Order. I hope that you are coming to the end of your question. I do need to move on.

Caroline Lucas: Mr Speaker, I could be a lot faster if I were not being barracked by Conservative Members.

Mr Speaker: The challenge is to get those on the Front Bench moving quickly. We want to get speed into this, so I am sure that she is ending now.

Caroline Lucas: Given that, as his Defence Secretary said earlier this week, information is as powerful as any tank, can he explain why he is turning a blind eye to allegations of Russian disruption? Why is he playing fast and loose with our national security—

Mr Speaker: Order. I call the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: I repeat what I told the hon. Lady ages ago—if I have got her right. I have seen absolutely no evidence of successful Russian interference in any electoral event.

7. [905695] **Gareth Bacon** (Orpington) (Con): I welcome the steps that the Government are taking this year to help hard-working families in Orpington with their energy bills. The majority of people receive at least £350 of support. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that even those not eligible for the council tax rebate will still receive additional support thanks to discretionary funding set aside for local authorities?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I can tell him that the people of Orpington and elsewhere will receive support if they do not qualify for the council tax rebate from the £144 million fund that he rightly mentions.

5. [905693] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): How does the Prime Minister think it looks, when we are in a cost of living crisis, with our constituents struggling to put food on the table or coats on their kids’ backs, and members of his Cabinet are throwing their toys out of the pram because they want to eat foie gras and wear fur?

The Prime Minister: We are tackling the cost of living crisis, which is caused by a global inflation spike, with everything that we can. I thank my right hon. Friend the Chancellor in particular for what he is doing to abate the costs of energy—lifting the living wage by the biggest ever amount and helping people on universal credit. The single best thing that we have done on the cost of living is making sure that we have millions more people into work. There are 430,000 more in employment now than there were before the pandemic began. That is how we are tackling the cost of living, and we will get on with it.

8. [905696] **Saqib Bhatti** (Meriden) (Con): Last month, I held a careers fair at the Woodlands Campus of Solihull College, which trains apprentices for the automotive, construction and aviation industry. These apprentices are talented and hard-working, which is why Flybe has chosen Birmingham Airport in my constituency as its national headquarters. Will the Prime Minister take up my invitation to visit Solihull College and meet these wonderful apprentices and then also visit Birmingham Airport to see how the aviation industry is recovering from the pandemic?

The Prime Minister: I am only too happy—thrilled—to visit my hon. Friend in Meriden at any time.

6. [905694] **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): The right hon. Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer) is currently under investigation for Islamophobia, following accusations that he told a fellow MP that her being a

Muslim was making colleagues uncomfortable. How did the Government punish this behaviour? With a promotion that puts the accused Member in charge of the complaints procedure. Of course, we all know that the Prime Minister himself is no stranger to derogatory remarks about Muslim women, so let me ask the Prime Minister—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is not the appropriate place to be raising that. We now go to Nickie Aiken.

10. [905698] **Nickie Aiken** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I have just come from a meeting with the London Pedicabs Operators Association, Transport for London and the Department for Transport, where sadly my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) confirmed that on Friday he will be objecting once again to my Pedicabs (London) Bill, which means it will fall. Does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree that it is time we legislated for pedicabs, to ensure that they are safe for women and girls to use, that we rid ourselves of the dodgy fares and that the noise they create is regulated? Will he work with me to legislate for and to regulate pedicabs once and for all?

The Prime Minister: When I was Mayor of London I always yearned to be in a position to put that through Parliament, and now I am. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend and we will ensure we give parliamentary time to make it possible. It will be a boon for cyclists and a boon for taxi drivers, and it is high time we did it.

9. [905697] **Ian Byrne** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): We have a humanitarian crisis of food poverty in all the constituencies represented in this House. We have more food banks than branches of McDonald's, and people face starving or freezing in their homes at this very moment because of the horrific cost of living crisis and because of political choices made by this Government. In 2015, the Government signed up to delivering the 2030 sustainable development goals domestically, including ending hunger. Can the Prime Minister tell me who, and what Department, is responsible for delivering the goal of ending hunger domestically, and can he send me a copy of the plan to deliver it?

The Prime Minister: The whole of Government is engaged in that campaign. To that end, we have expanded free school meals for five to seven-year-olds, which helps 1.3 million children, we have boosted the Healthy Start vouchers by one third and, of course, the holiday food and activities programme continues to run, with a £200 million fund. The best thing we can do as a country and a society, however, is keep going with our plan for economic growth with higher-wage, higher-skilled jobs putting bread on the table of families up and down this country.

12. [905700] **Miriam Cates** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): Liberty Speciality Steels is an important steelworks in my Stocksbridge constituency, which produces high-quality steel and has provided high-value jobs for generations. Sadly, following the collapse of Greensill Capital, the parent company Liberty Steel has faced financial uncertainty for some time, threatening the business and thousands of jobs. Does my right hon.

Friend agree that the steel industry sits at the heart of our levelling-up agenda, and will he commit to looking at all options to support the business through this period of uncertainty, as the Government have done so effectively for Sheffield Forgemasters and British Steel?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for everything she does to champion steel. She is right that it is of strategic importance for our country; we must look at ways we can help the steel industry to have access to cheaper, low-carbon energy, and this Government will do everything we can to ensure that that happens. So far we have provided over £600 million since 2013 to help with the cost of energy and put in a £350 million industrial energy transformation fund, but I stress to the House that that alone will not be enough. As we transition to a low-carbon future, hydrocarbons must also have their place.

11. [905699] **Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Unpaid family carers are treated appallingly by this Government. I am not talking about paid care staff in care homes, but about people who provide care, unpaid, for family members. While food and energy costs skyrocket, carer's allowance is increasing in April by only £2 to a miserly £69 a week. That insulting amount will be more than swallowed up by the £2.50 cost of a single lateral flow test so that carers can keep the person they care for safe. How can the Prime Minister justify this tax on caring?

The Prime Minister: I think that the whole House understands the pressures on carers and the immense amount that they contribute to our society. We are doing our best to support people throughout our country. I think the House also understands that we cannot indefinitely support universal free testing. We are uprating the carers allowance, and of course carers are also entitled to the increases that we are putting through in universal credit.

14. [905702] **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Can I follow up my right hon. Friend's statement on Monday on removing the covid restrictions? I welcome the further support for the immunosuppressed. Will he ensure that the NHS reviews the system for identifying the most vulnerable, as I think that some who are at risk are in danger of being missed—for example, those with blood cancers—and will he then ensure that the relevant testing and antiviral drugs will be readily available, alongside boosters, for the immunosuppressed but also for their carers?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about the immunosuppressed and the need to identify them correctly. We currently think that there are 1.3 million. Yes, of course they will have access not only to testing but to vaccines and boosters, as well as priority access for new therapeutics and antivirals.

13. [905701] **Sam Tarry** (Ilford South) (Lab): Last October, a promising young footballer in my constituency called Kamran Khalid, a former winner of Chelsea FC's Asian Star scheme who had played for the famous Senrab FC in Wanstead, was on his way home to see his mum after finishing at the gym, and he

was stabbed 24 times—murdered just yards from his front door. One of the alleged perpetrators was as young as 15. I hope that the Prime Minister would agree with me that far more needs to be done to stamp out the scourge of knife crime, including addressing the underlying causes. Will he agree to meet me and Kamran's mother Samina, who has said that losing her 18-year-old son has

“left a void in her heart forever”,

to discuss what more can be done to make our streets safer and ensure that other families do not ever have to suffer this heartbreaking loss?

The Prime Minister: I totally share the hon. Gentleman's feelings about his constituents and the tragic loss in the family concerned. We must crack down more on knife crime. That is one of the reasons we are putting more police out on the streets. It is also why we are rounding up the county lines drugs gangs, who play a big part in this, sadly. We have done 2,000 so far and there is more to do. That is why we are recruiting many more police and giving them the powers they need to come down hard on those gangs.

15. [905703] **Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): The Government's commitment to £25 million for a new electric bus fleet in Warrington will have a transformational effect on public transport across Warrington. Does the Prime Minister agree that the right way to spend that £25 million is by buying British-made buses, supporting highly skilled manufacturing jobs right across the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I thank my hon. Friend, who is a great champion for Warrington. Warrington has secured £20 million for new zero-emission buses. I am delighted to say—this is a statistic that I can barely believe but it is here in my brief—that 80% of buses in Britain's urban areas are already produced domestically, which is a fantastic thing. We all want to see more of that, and I hope that Warrington will consider excellent UK bus manufacturers when it comes to its next contract.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): Yesterday the Prime Minister told me that we can sanction Duma members through the Government's new sanctions package. The Minister for Europe and North America, the right hon. Member for Baintree (James Cleverly), told the House that we can sanction Duma members not through the new regime but as an extension of pre-existing sanction rules. Yet this morning the Foreign Secretary said that the legislation for sanctions against Duma members will take weeks to be made legally watertight. So, Prime Minister, who is right? How can we say that we are standing strong against Russian aggression when our sanctions response is such a muddle and such a mess?

The Prime Minister: The whole House would agree, I hope, that it is quite a thing to sanction parliamentarians, and that is what we are doing, and not only that—just in the past couple of days, we have put forward the biggest package of sanctions against Russia that this country has ever introduced, and we are coming forward with even more. They will have an impact not just on Duma Members and people who voted for the secession

of the oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk, but on the entire Putin regime, and I am glad that the Labour Opposition, at least for now, support the sanctions.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): This is day six for thousands of households across East Sussex who have no power and no water. As we become more and more reliant on electricity, we must become more resilient. Can I ask the Prime Minister to ensure that the utility companies work together, that water companies have to have generators in place so that the water does not fail when the power does, and that local resilience forums are fit for purpose and communicate with their local communities? We need more help on this, Prime Minister—please help us.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much for what he says about people in East Sussex. I know how tough it is for people who have been short of power for days on end, and it is no consolation to them for me to say that 97% of those who lost power have now been reconnected. We are working as fast as we can with local authorities and the electricity companies to ensure that they get their power back, but also to ensure that we build in more resilience for the future.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Let us be clear about this: is it not an absolute disgrace that a Privy Counsellor, adviser to the Queen and former First Minister of Scotland sees fit to broadcast his half-baked world views week after week on Russian television?

The Prime Minister: That was a brilliant, powerful question with which I think the whole House assented. Would it not have been more powerful if it had come from the leader of the Scottish National party?

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): The Prime Minister will have seen the devastation in Shrewsbury from the flooding of the River Severn. This is the third year in a row that Shrewsbury has faced these appalling floods. I chair the caucus of 44 Conservative MPs who have the River Severn, Britain's longest river, flowing through their constituencies. Will my right hon. Friend help me and our caucus to do everything possible to find a long-term solution to managing Britain's longest river? In the meantime, we have put forward four opportunities for flood defences in Shrewsbury to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Will he please take an interest in those, because Shrewsbury cannot afford a fourth year in a row of flooding?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is completely right in what he says about the Severn and the violence of the flooding in the Severn area, which I have seen for myself several times. There are still flood warnings in place along the Severn, and all I can tell him is that we are working flat out to put in place the remediations to help people who have suffered from flooding, but we are also investing £5.2 billion in the flood defences of this country.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The leader in this morning's *Times* is a scathing criticism of the Government's limited sanctions against Russia. If the Prime Minister will not listen to Members of this House, will he at least listen to *The Times* newspaper?

The Prime Minister: I have the utmost respect for the media, and I of course study it as much as I can, but I have to say that the package that the UK has put forward has been leading the world, and there is more to come. *[Interruption.]* I hear somebody on the Opposition Benches saying that it is weak so far, but it is not—it is strong and it will be very strong. Something that would

also be strong would be to take the Whip away from the 14 Labour Members who say that the aggressor in Ukraine is NATO. That would be a strong thing to do.

Mr Speaker: That is the end of Prime Minister's questions.

Points of Order

12.39 pm

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you been given notice that an Education Minister will make a statement to the House on the Government's response to the Augar review; the future of student and university finance; and the financial arrangements governing student loan repayments? No less than 1,000 days after Augar reported, it seems that the Government are, once more, more interested in briefing journalists than in informing the House on the future of our universities. It is extraordinary that the Government are yet again choosing to announce serious changes to higher education in that way. This morning, students will have seen their hard work belittled by Ministers—

Mr Speaker: Order. You have raised the point of order; you cannot make a speech on it. The Secretary of State may wish to answer you.

The Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. As you know, I am making a statement to the House tomorrow.

Mr Speaker: That resolves that problem.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you give me some guidance? Twice in Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister referred to Alex Salmond and talked about him being one of our own, which is quite disgraceful. Alex Salmond has nothing to do with the Scottish National party. He is the leader of—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but I want to hear the point of order, because I have to answer to the question. I must hear the question.

Ian Blackford: Alex Salmond is not a member of the Scottish National party. Indeed, he is a member of another party. Moreover, the SNP has made it quite clear that no parliamentarian is permitted to appear on RT. To be traduced in the way that we were by the Prime Minister is simply unacceptable and he should withdraw his comments.

Mr Speaker: You have absolutely put it on record that Alex Salmond is no longer the leader of the SNP. That was many years ago and, as I understand it, he is now a

member of the Alba party. That has now been corrected and I am sure everyone is aware of it.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will recall that, yesterday, I raised a point of order about the Prime Minister saying to the House that Roman Abramovich had been sanctioned when it turned out that he had not been. I gather that the Prime Minister has now corrected the record. I wonder whether there is a means of ensuring that, tomorrow, *Hansard* is printed in gold letters, or red letters, because that is the first time. It is particularly exciting that it has only taken a Russian billionaire to get the Prime Minister to correct the record.

Mr Speaker: I think it has just been gold-plated. It has certainly been registered and you will be able to read it tomorrow.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Earlier today, before PMQs, a joint written ministerial statement was published on the decision to waive the right to remain application costs for non-UK personnel of our armed forces who have served at least six years—a cause that was supported by 200 Members of the House in a letter to the Home Secretary some while ago. It provides a clear and affordable pathway to British citizenship for all those, of whatever nationality, who have been prepared to serve the United Kingdom. Could you help to secure time for a debate on that important measure?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member has been here long enough to know that business questions are tomorrow and he will be wanting to raise this. I will give him a pat on the back because he has done a great job.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The leader of the SNP may have inadvertently misled the House earlier. He said that no SNP member appears on Russian television. I am told—*[Interruption.]* I thought he did; perhaps he would like to clarify. I thought he said that every member of the SNP—*[Interruption.]*—had been told not to appear on Russian television.

Mr Speaker: Order. We cannot both be on our feet at the same time. I would say that is not the case. We will be able to read *Hansard* tomorrow and if you feel it is not correct, you can come back with a point of order.

Energy Pricing (Off Gas Grid Households)

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

12.44 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the application of the energy price cap in relation to households without mains gas supply; to require the Secretary of State and Ofgem to make proposals for measures to ensure that households do not have to pay more for energy because they do not have access to mains gas supply; and for connected purposes.

Let me lay out the key points of the issue and then describe how vital it is for people to be protected from a crisis on top of a crisis, because they are caught in a specific energy price trap that is none of their making and that is set to bring additional hardship and misery to people already being financially crushed by a cost of living crisis that has been imposed on them.

The current price cap introduced by the UK Government and Ofgem is based on the assumption that households across the nations of the UK consume energy with a split of 80% gas and 20% electricity. However, about one in six households across the nations of the UK are currently off gas grid. The result is that these households are forced to pay about four times more for their energy bills than the so-called average household. We have a ridiculous situation in which Ofgem's own statistics tell it that more than 15% of all UK households cannot get mains gas, yet it treats them as if they do, based on that 80:20 split in favour of gas. This ignores the energy price consequences for those who need to fill that 80% gap with other forms of fuel, such as domestic oil or other unregulated fuel, all of which have soaring prices themselves. This is grossly unfair. The inevitable result is that most off gas grid households then become wholly reliant on electricity. This is discrimination, and this is unacceptable. The UK Government are failing families across the nations of the UK simply because of where they live.

However, that is not the worst of it. From 1 April, Ofgem will set its price cap tariffs—they will be painful for most households, as we know already—at 28.34p per unit for electricity and 7.37p per unit for gas. What this means is that those who cannot access the assumed 80% of their energy from mains gas will be paying four times as much as those who can and nearly twice as much for the standing charge. The Ofgem average consumer faces an eye-watering rise in their bill of 54% or £700 a year, which takes them to about £2,000 a year. That is bad enough, but spare a thought for off gas grid customers, many facing colder rural conditions, who will see their bills hit an outrageous £4,416 for the same net energy usage. It gets even worse for those on prepayment meters, who face even higher energy price caps.

People and families are already struggling even before this combined cost of living crisis and energy price conundrum, coupled with the callous UK Government cut of £20 a week in universal credit. People now find themselves in some cases literally powerless. They no longer have a choice even between heating or eating. For some—too many now, and many more coming soon—that is the shameful reality of life in the UK under this UK Tory Government. The kick in the teeth is that consumers in off gas grid areas, such as those in

the highlands and islands that I represent in my constituency of Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, can often see clean and cheap renewable energy being generated in their own backyards.

People in off gas grid areas are also likely to be faced with higher transport costs. They are highly likely to be living in older properties that are less energy efficient. Crucially, they are likely to have lower than average incomes. What chance do they have if nothing is done to help them? Fuel poverty, and the extreme fuel poverty I am describing, can lead to many negative outcomes—far too many for me to list in the time that I have here—but the charity Crisis has raised concerns about rapidly accelerating homelessness. That is just one of the possible consequences of the rising debt, rent and mortgage arrears for many as a result of this.

What is the point in having a UK energy regulator if it is unwilling to ensure that, at very least, people are equitably treated, whether they live in an off gas grid area or with the benefit of being on it? Either Ofgem or the UK Government can make the required change, and they must not be allowed to play off each other, or to deflect and hide behind each other on this issue. The Government could choose a mechanism such as a vulnerable area designation, ensuring that all off gas grid households are not charged any more than on-gas households are for the same number of units used.

The UK Government should also commit to an immediate and urgent review of regulated energy prices and their component costs, to level the playing field for all households. That process should begin immediately. There is an undeniable moral duty to intervene, and to rescue the affected families and children right now from impending financial disaster. Sorting that injustice should be swift, but while those levers are being pulled, there should be no delay in emergency action to support people facing those impossible challenges.

Along with longer-term reform, and in addition to the designation of vulnerable areas, the UK Government should play catch-up and help people in other ways. For example, while instructing Ofgem to create vulnerable area mechanisms and commencing that review of regulated energy prices, they could reinstate the £20 per week cut to universal credit. The Chancellor's loan scheme does not provide meaningful help for those I have described; it simply pushes a small part of the problem out.

The Scottish Government are using the consequential funding, but as the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy, Kate Forbes MSP, pointed out, much more is needed than small loans and council tax discounts. The UK Government could give further assistance, for example by copying the Scottish Government, who have introduced the Scottish child payment and now doubled it to £20 a week, and are operating the child winter heat allowance, up by 5%. They are supporting carers and disabled people with additional grants, including help for severely disabled children and low-income households. Replicating all that will not solve the problems people face, but it would help people across the UK, and allow Scotland to provide even more help through consequentials and spending, so that more people might be helped through this escalating crisis.

I mentioned older, less energy-efficient homes. The Scottish Government announced an additional £80 million to help households to install energy efficient measures aimed at reducing heating bills. I urge people to take

[Drew Hendry]

advantage of that, but the UK Government should play catch-up on their own commitment to boost it. The UK Government have so far allocated only a fraction of the £2.5 billion they pledged for the home upgrade grant—another measure that could exist in the longer term if the will existed on the Government Benches.

At the heart of this issue is a badly broken, discriminatory system that must be fixed. Yes, it needs emergency interventions, but the problem will persist and get worse, driving people into desperation, due to the lack of thought given to the problem of off gas grid inequality. This Bill would fix that. Ofgem and the UK Government cannot now say that they have not been warned of the dire consequences of inaction. Let us see them work together to grasp this challenge for once, to do the right thing, to support people and families, and to support the Bill and take the urgent steps that are desperately required.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Drew Hendry, Ian Blackford, Brendan O'Hara, Jaime Stone, Pete Wishart, Angus Brendan MacNeil, Alan Brown, Ben Lake, Liz Saville Roberts, Hywel Williams, Richard Thomson, and Stephen Flynn present the Bill.

Drew Hendry accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the first time; to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 258).

Points of Order

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to correct the record. Yesterday, I said that the Israeli Labor party and Meretz party—Labour's two equal sister parties in Israel—had written to our current leadership in support of a boycott of goods and companies in the occupied territories. The letter, sent in July 2020, in fact came from the former Speaker of the Knesset, the former party chair, the former interim President of Israel, and other former and current MPs from the respective parties. Although that might be the view of the Meretz party—the larger of the two sister parties at the time—it has been expressed clearly to me that that was not the view of the Israeli Labor party, and it did not say that in the letter. I wish to correct that for the record clearly today.

Mr Speaker: I thank Lloyd Russell-Moyle for the correction.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The House will be aware that recent storms have battered and bruised much of the country. First Storm Arwen hit parts of Scotland, and more recently Storms Dudley, Eunice and Franklin left more than half a million homes without power and saw some rivers burst their banks. We have been reached out to by people in Sussex and Surrey, specifically near Guildford and in areas such as Peaslake, Frimley Green and Cranleigh, which are still without power after the storms. Have you had any indication, Mr Speaker, of a forthcoming Government statement about those ongoing issues? Have Ministers made any commitments about travelling to meet people in those areas that are still affected by the storms?

Mr Speaker: As the hon. Lady knows, normally the Government would not bring forward a statement on an Opposition day, but she has certainly ensured that those on the Government Benches have heard the point about Ministers visiting the area. There is a great opportunity to raise that issue once more at business questions.

Opposition Day

[13TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Countering Russian Aggression and Tackling Illicit Finance

12.56 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House expresses solidarity with the people of Ukraine, and supports their sovereignty and Ukraine's territorial integrity; condemns Russian aggression and emphasises the UK's commitment to NATO; resolves to end illicit finance that rewards and sustains the Putin regime in Russia; calls on the Government to introduce an Economic Crime Bill, an Overseas Entities Bill and a register of beneficial ownership by the end of March 2022; and further calls on the Foreign Secretary to make a statement to this House on the implementation of the recommendations of the Intelligence and Security Committee's Russia Report, HC 632, published on 21 July 2020.

My ancestors knew what it was like to have freedom taken away at the barrel of gun. They knew what the twisted lies of imperialism sounded like. They knew what it was like to live without the vote. They were taken from their homes, enslaved, shackled to ships, and forced to work for the profit of a foreign empire. No act of authoritarianism is ever the same, but Vladimir Putin's actions in Ukraine in recent weeks are an ugly attempt to restore the Russian empire.

The Russian President denied the right of a sovereign nation to exist. He unilaterally recognised separatist movements that seek to dismember Ukraine. Then, under the cowardly shield of the night, he sent in tanks and soldiers to enforce his diktat. Putin's crimes against peace need a united and immediate response: a full set of sanctions, possible now; to provide continued support for the Ukrainian army; and to clean out the dirty Russian cash in our system. However, to stand up to Putin in the long term, we need to stand up to Putinism. Putin is not unique. He is the figurehead of an ideology that is being emulated by despots and dictators around the world.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that not nearly enough action is being taken to crack down on illicit Russian influence in the UK? Our structures are set up to be so opaque that we have no idea of how strong Russian influence is. With Putin's money still being funnelled, can we not create a proper register of overseas entities, clearly to see and address this issue?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is right. The cornerstone of any democracy is the accountability and transparency that allows the general public to see who owns what. I will come on to more of that in a moment.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I appreciate that my right hon. Friend will say more on this issue. It is estimated that there is at least £2 billion of dirty money in the London property market—much of it is concentrated in high value areas including Kensington and my borough of Westminster—and we do not know the beneficial owners of those properties. Was he as

surprised as me to hear the Prime Minister say that we may not expect the economic crimes Bill until the next Session?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is so right. These properties are pricing out young people and challenging working people. Often, the lights are off and no one knows who owns them. If that is not an urgent issue, I do not know what is. I was staggered when the Prime Minister said that it did not merit action until the next Session.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): It is not just about urgent action. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is outrageous that legislation on publishing the beneficial ownership of UK properties owned by entities abroad was promised by the Government in 2016, there was consultation on a draft Bill—I think a Bill is sitting in Government, ready to go—and it was promised again in the 2019 manifesto and at G7 meetings but has yet to appear? Is that not an utter scandal?

Mr Lammy: My right hon. Friend is right. In six years, there has been promise after promise—we have had more promises from the Dispatch Box today—and we are still waiting. It is not worthy of our great democracy. The public deserve better.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Lammy: I will give way one last time and then make some progress.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Further to that point, my right hon. Friend will be aware that the Treasury Committee has published a report on economic crime in which it calls for an economic crime Bill, so this matter is supported not just by Opposition Members but by many Conservative Members. There is support right across the House, so why is there a lack of urgency from the Government?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is right. We are talking about foreign ownership of property in our country, and that ought to command cross-party support. Just six or seven years ago, I would never have thought that this would feel like a partisan issue and be the basis of an Opposition day debate. It should have had time on the Floor, and we should have had an economic crime Bill years ago, but it takes the Opposition dragging the issue into the public domain to get a response.

To stand up to Putin in the long term, we need to stand up to Putinism, because Putin is not unique; he is the figurehead of an ideology that is being emulated by despots and dictators around the world. Putinism is imperialism. Putinism is authoritarianism. Putinism is ethno-nationalism. The Russian regime represents a fundamental geopolitical threat and we will not defeat the broader threat until we tackle the ideology that underlies it. Part of our message to Putin must be that his actions are a historic mistake.

This is not the first time that a Russian leader has waded into conflict as a result of his ideology. The same thing happened in East Berlin in 1953 when the USSR moved in to suppress riots. It happened in Hungary in 1956 when Russia sent in troops to invade the country as well as in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and in Afghanistan in 1979. None of those acts of aggression was a success in the long term for Russia, and civilians caught in the

[Mr Lammy]

middle always pay a terrible price. In the invasion of Czechoslovakia, Russian soldiers strode in convinced that their invasion was liberating the Czech people from capitalism, but, when they are arrived, normal Czechs surrounded the invading forces and said, “Why are you here? You aren’t liberators—you are aggressors.” The Russian troops were deflated; the propaganda that they had been fed was a lie. The same thing will happen if Putin moves on the rest of Ukraine.

Only the Ukrainian people should have the freedom to determine their own futures. That fundamental belief in self-determination is shared across so many of our borders. It is a founding principle of so many of our closest allies and partners across this great continent and beyond it. The logic of democracy is why Putin will never win in the end. Any reward that he gains will be pyrrhic.

Putin has made his move. The wider threat that Ukraine faces is immediate, but the consequences for Europe and the west are also stark. This is likely the end of the post-cold war era, but we do not yet know what era is next, because it has not been decided. The effects of this moment will depend as much on our response to this aggression as on the aggression itself.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Member for putting forward an impressive contribution to the debate. Following his line of thought, does he agree that, having decided our first step of imposing sanctions, we must do so properly and with wisdom? We also need to act in co-operation with other nations to ensure that we do not see Russian money supply transferred from our banks to friendly banks—those in Switzerland, for example, among other nations—in the next few days.

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is right. He knows a lot about violence and the corruption of money to fund that violence, and I am sure that the whole House is grateful for his wisdom.

What we know is that autocrats from around the world are watching to see if we meet this test of our strength and resolve. China will be watching to see how the west responds to Russia as it plots its next move. We must be strong not only to defend the people of Ukraine whose dignity and resilience has been an inspiration to all of us throughout the crisis but to defend the liberal international order that we need to stay safe.

Labour would go deeper, broader, stronger and faster on sanctions. The Government’s targeting of just five banks and three individuals is simply not enough. They claim that these are the toughest ever sanctions on Russia, but, after the annexation of Crimea, the UK froze the assets of almost 200 individuals and 50 entities alongside a range of other measures. Labour would go much further. We would increase the depth of sanctions by targeting more oligarchs and more banks. We would increase the breadth of sanctions by widening the measures beyond just asset freezes to sectoral measures, blocking dealing in Russian sovereign debt and banning the fake-news producing Russia Today. We would ramp up the speed of sanctions—we would not wait for Putin’s next act of war but introduce the full set of sanctions now. We would increase their coherence, moving in

lockstep with our allies who have sanctioned more people more quickly than us. We would have stopped Nord Stream 2 and targeted Belarus as well, and we would make our sanctions stronger by targeting the systems people operate in as well as individuals. That means reforming Companies House so that it is fit for purpose, creating a register of overseas owners of UK property, as has been mentioned, delivering a strong economic crime Bill, as has been mentioned time and again, and implementing the recommendations of the Russia report finally in this House.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will be aware that an estimated £100 billion a year is run up through money laundering, fraud and corruption, so he is right that it is imperative that the Government take action now. When the Minister for Security and Borders, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), gave evidence to the Treasury Committee, he admitted that the Government have been found wanting—not his words, but more or less so—and that there is much to do. This week is the moment to act.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend mentions £100 billion a year: money that could have been spent on schools, money that could have been spent on hospitals, money that could have been spent on our post-covid recovery.

Emma Hardy: I thank my right hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene once again. The words the Minister for Security and Borders, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) used when giving evidence to the Treasury Committee were that he was “not happy”—that is the quote in our report—with the progress the Government have made in tackling economic crime. That is in the Treasury Committee report. I share his unhappiness with the progress the Government have been making. If the Minister is not happy with the progress the Government are making and we are not happy with the progress the Government are making, we can only guess why there still seems to be a lack of progress.

Mr Lammy: I have to say to my hon. Friend that it is challenging all our consciousness when the Government say they are not happy and the Minister says he is not happy and nothing happens. They are in charge and they have to fix this.

Sanctions are the way we punish Russia for its crimes, but there is so much more action we should have taken years ago to defeat the corruption, crime and lies that define the ideology and operating system of Putinism. That means rooting out the dirty money that is corrupting our economy and our democracy. It is no use tackling Russian aggression abroad while doing nothing to tackle Russian corruption at home. For a decade, the Tories have failed on this. Worse, they have enabled it. We are working with the Government on standing up against Russian aggression in Ukraine, but we must work in the UK to get our own house in order. It is a great shame that the UK is regularly described as the money laundering capital of the world. It is shameful that our US allies have said they are concerned that the influence of Russian money has compromised us. It is shameful that the Tories have failed to stop Russian money from turning London into a laundromat for ill-gotten gains.

Our openness to kleptocracy and its money has weakened our country. Dirty Russian money props up Putin's regime by shielding the dark money of the Russian oligarchs and Putin himself. It fuels crime on our streets. When kids risk their lives to deal drugs on county lines, that is dirty money. When vulnerable women are trafficked across the country to be abused, that is dirty money. When people are forced to live in fear because of criminal gangs on the streets, that is funded by dirty money. Dirty money makes the housing crisis worse by inflating prices and buying up properties to lie empty as assets not homes. And it leads people to ask questions about the Conservative party, which has accepted £2 million in donations since Boris Johnson took power in 2019. Mr Speaker, it must give that money back.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): One thing my right hon. Friend has not mentioned yet is tier 1 visas. I note that Lubov Chernukhin was given a tier 1 visa in 2011 and Alexander Temerko was given a tier 1 visa in 2011 by Conservative Home Secretaries. Subsequently, between them they have given millions of pounds to the Conservative party and lots of individual Members of this House have taken money from those individuals. It certainly looks like corruption, does it not, if you give out a visa, do not insist on that person surrendering their Russian nationality, and those people use extensive shell companies in the British Virgin Islands and elsewhere to hide where their money is coming from? That is corruption, is it not?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is right. We cannot have one tier for the elite and another tier for everybody else. That is the problem and it should have been dealt with years ago.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What concerns me is that the way that Russia is set up at the moment—I described it yesterday as a mafia state—means that if you are going to make money out of Russia you have to have the permission of Mr Putin, otherwise you are out of the picture. Does my right hon. Friend therefore not share my concern that a lot of the money coming in is directly or indirectly linked to the activities of Putin himself?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We note, do we not, individuals who are the target of sanctions in Europe and who have been the target of sanctions in the United States since 2018? And we wait and we wait and we wait. And we wonder why this Government are so slow to act.

Today, we call on the whole House to come together to end the tidal flow of dirty Russian money flooding into our country by: ending our openness to fraud and money laundering with an economic crime Bill that should be brought forward this month; fixing our inadequate regulation of political donations by reversing the Conservative's Elections Bill that is setting us back; strengthening our lax mechanisms of corporate governance; enabling our national agencies to clamp down on economic crime; and blocking the threat of foreign interference in our politics. We need transparency with an overseas entities Bill and the reform of Companies House to shut down the shell companies that obscure the origins of wealth and hide corruption, and reveal who owns land from abroad. Finally, this House must

come together and recognise the urgency of implementing the Russia report, which was published in July 2020—nearly two years ago.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way and I welcome the commitments he has made on the sort of action a Labour Government would immediately put in place. There is one area he has not covered, which I think is of great importance: the role played by the financial services sector and the enablers here in London in supporting money laundering and illicit finance. Whether lawyers, accountants, the banks or other advisers, they are often complicit in this activity. Does he agree that the economic crime Bill also needs clauses that tackle the role of enablers in enabling illicit finance?

Mr Lammy: My right hon. Friend is exactly right. Over two thirds of our economy is the service sector. The consultants, lawyers and accountants are absolutely a part of the process of dirty money and the laundromat. We must act to deal with them. *[Interruption.]* Of course not all of them, but there are facilitators and we expect to see the appropriate clauses in the economic crime Bill.

Defeating Putinism starts with leadership that represents our values. If we are to be taken seriously on the world stage when we talk about democracy, we cannot be watering it down at home with unfair reforms such as voter ID and loose rules about overseas donations. If we are to be credible champions of international law, our leaders must practise the laws they set at home. The best way to defend the rule of law is to follow it.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): The right hon. Gentleman rightly emphasises what the UK can do to clean up matters in the UK. One commentator has talked about the need to tackle what he calls the ecosystem of Russian influence over UK democracy, which would mean going further and including direct donations to politicians—some of whom are Members of this House—the actions of public affairs companies and lobbying companies, and in particular the funding of think-tanks. Does he agree that a very comprehensive package of measures is needed?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman makes the list more comprehensive and he is exactly right.

Enough is now enough. Putin has invaded Ukraine, a sovereign state and a friend and partner of the United Kingdom. That is an attack on the hopes, dreams and aspirations of ordinary Ukrainians. We can no longer let him exploit the holes in our system at home to enable his aggression abroad. This is not a partisan issue, and nor should it be difficult. It is shameful that the Government have not acted long ago. We want to work with the Government not only to win against Putin's aggression abroad, but to defeat the ideology of Putinism at home. We are united in this House in support of NATO, in support of freedom, and in support of democracy and equality. Let us send a clear message to President Putin and authoritarians around the world that the UK is no longer a haven for dirty money.

1.19 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Middle East (Amanda Milling): I thank the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for securing this timely debate and join

[Amanda Milling]

him in expressing our united support for the people of Ukraine and their territorial integrity. We have seen events unfolding that none of us thought we would ever witness again.

We have unreservedly condemned this outrageous and unjustified act. This action is inconsistent with the United Nations charter and a clear breach of international law. It demonstrates flagrant disregard for Russia's commitments under the Minsk agreement and represents a further attack on Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. We continue to call on Russia to observe its obligations under article 2(4) of the United Nations charter to

"refrain...from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state".

We reiterate our unshakeable commitment to the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of Ukraine. We insist that the Russian Federation immediately returns to compliance with its obligations under the United Nations charter and its commitments under the Helsinki Final Act and the 1994 Budapest memorandum. We demand that the Russian Federation immediately withdraws all its military forces from the territory of Ukraine, unconditionally and without exception. We also insist that the Russian Federation allows and facilitates the safe and unobstructed access of humanitarian assistance by international agencies for those in need in Ukraine. Yesterday, the Prime Minister announced, here in the House, the UK's response to this action.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I agree with the Minister's fine words, but two weeks ago, the Prime Minister told the House, on Ukraine, that the UK's role was "to lead the West". In the meantime, Germany has put Nord Stream 2 on hold indefinitely. Today, the European Union has sanctioned Duma deputies, the Russian Defence Minister and the Russian air force and Black sea fleet commanders, and it has brought in asset freezes and sanctioned 23 individuals, five banks and an internet troll factory. The USA has also extended sanctions. Is the UK actually leading the west?

Amanda Milling: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I would say that we absolutely are leading, with our allies. I will come on to the package of measures and some of the points that have been raised, as well as what we will go on to do.

The UK is one of the largest and most open economies, and London is one of the world's most attractive destinations for overseas investments. Those factors not only make the UK attractive for legitimate business, but expose the UK to illicit finance and money laundering risks. We are well aware that individuals with links to the Russian state may seek to further their reputation and influence in the UK through strategic investments. We continue to look in close detail at the nature of those relationships. We examine the intentions of those individuals; professional enablers, individuals or entities who facilitate corrupt elites; and what that money can be and is being used for in the UK.

Money obtained through corruption or criminality is not welcome in the UK or in our Crown dependencies and overseas territories. The Government are at the

forefront of tackling illicit finance, combating the threat from source to destination, including those linked to Russia.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Does the Minister share the concerns of our security services that Putin and Russian individuals who happen to be Tory donors could have undue influence in this House or the other place?

Amanda Milling: We are conscious of all influences from different states. I will come on to some of the measures that the Government have taken to combat illicit finance and some measures that we will take forward.

Emma Hardy: I believe that there are Ministers and Government Members who are frustrated at the lack of progress that the Government are making in tackling money laundering and fraud, which brings me back to the question of why. The Government have the majority that they need, they control the timetable and they have been in power for more than a decade, so why is there a lack of progress on the issue of Companies House? Our Treasury Committee report again talked about the slow pace and the lack of progress. What else does the Minister need for us to make progress on this issue, when we in the Opposition are offering an open door and saying, "We will support it."?

Amanda Milling: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention. I will set out the steps that the Government have taken and come on to—[*Interruption.*] Let us start with the actions that we have taken and then look at what we will do.

First, we have announced significant new investments. In the 2021 spending review settlement, £42 million was announced for economic crime reforms and £63 million for Companies House reform. In addition, the introduction of the economic crime levy will raise an estimated £100 million a year from 2023-24 to fund new economic crime initiatives.

Secondly, we are strengthening our law enforcement powers. The Criminal Finances Act 2017 introduced new powers to combat dirty money in the UK. It allowed for the proactive investigation of assets owned by suspected criminals and corrupt public figures.

Thirdly, we are developing new tools to target illegitimate wealth. [*Interruption.*] I will come back to these points. In April last year, the UK launched the global anti-corruption sanctions regime, which allows the Government to impose asset freezes and travel bans on those involved in serious corruption around the world. That is a strong personal deterrent and has been used so far to sanction 27 individuals in 10 different countries.

Chris Bryant: I am delighted that we have Magnitsky sanctions; I campaigned for them for 12 years—as did many other Members, including the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), who is on the Government Benches—so it is a great thing that they are there. However, when the Minister talks about Companies House reform, the legislation is there. It is ready and waiting. The most disgraceful thing that I have ever heard is a Companies House official telling a Committee of this House, "I'm really sorry. We sometimes just daren't take things forward because we know that Russian

oligarchs have much deeper pockets than we do.” The truth is that our integrity as a country is being bought. We have to change that.

Amanda Milling: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I will talk about what we want to crack down on, but, as he will recognise, such things need to be legally robust.

To go back to the examples that I was giving before that intervention, the UK is a world leader in corporate transparency. It is the first country in the G20 to implement a central public register of company beneficial owners, showing who ultimately owns and controls UK companies. However, we are determined to go further to crack down on dirty money and financial exploitation, and we are enhancing the already strong regulation, supervision and legislative powers that are at our disposal.

Dame Margaret Hodge: More in sorrow than in anger, I raise the issue of Russian money and its role within the Conservative party. Fedotov, Temerko, Chernukhin, Mikheev, Knaster and New Century Media are all Russians or Russian companies who have close links to the Conservative party and have given money to Conservative MPs, Conservative constituencies or the Conservative central office. The figure I have is greater than the one that Labour Front Benchers have been using; I think it has been at least £3.6 million over the past decade.

I urge the Minister—I really do say this more in sorrow than in anger—to go back to her colleagues, sort this out and get that money out. I would not give it back to Russia; I would give it to organisations such as Transparency International, which does a fantastic job helping us to fight corruption. Until the Conservative party does so, it will have no credibility at all in the argument on fighting corruption.

Amanda Milling: Let me be clear. The Conservative party does not accept foreign donations—after all, they are illegal. All donations to the party are received in good faith, after appropriate due diligence, from permissible sources. Donations are properly and transparently declared to the Electoral Commission and published by it, and they comply fully with the law.

Chris Bryant: Will the Minister give way?

Amanda Milling: Let me just finish this point. There are people of Russian origin in this country who are British citizens. Many are critics of Putin, and it is completely wrong and discriminatory to tar them with the same brush.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I am sorry that the Minister has to defend the indefensible. Will she confirm to the House today whether the vetting of Mohamed Amersi’s donation surfaced the news that he made \$4 million in a business deal with a man who was President Putin’s telecoms minister? Did the vetting cover that—yes or no?

Amanda Milling: As I say, donations to the Conservative party are received in good faith. They receive appropriate due diligence, are from permissible sources, are properly and transparently declared to and published by the Electoral Commission, and comply with the law.

Several hon. Members rose—

Amanda Milling: I will make progress, because I want to turn to sovereign debt. If Russia stages any further invasion into Ukraine, we will not hesitate to implement a comprehensive and unprecedented package of sanctions in close co-ordination with our allies around the world.

Rushanara Ali: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Amanda Milling: May I make a little progress? I have been quite generous, to be fair.

The package will include measures to stop the Kremlin’s access to UK financial markets for sovereign debt. That means that the Russian Government will be unable to access UK services to raise capital through the issuing and trading of sovereign debt.

To pick up on the point about Nord Stream 2, we welcome Chancellor Scholz’s strong response to Russia’s egregious actions: Germany’s decision to suspend Nord Stream 2. We in Europe must now wean ourselves off dependence on Putin’s oil and gas. For example, in 2020 less than 3% of the UK’s total gas supply came from Russia.

Many hon. Members have mentioned the economic crime Bill. We are committed to bringing it forward.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The Minister says we need to wean ourselves off Russian gas. That is eminently sensible, but I have a slightly wider question: do we need to wean ourselves off Russia more generally? Let me put it this way: does the Minister think it right in any circumstances that Tony Blair went to see then acting President Putin in 2000 or that David Cameron went to Moscow in 2011, almost to beg for Russian investment and placings and listings on the stock exchange? Surely we have made mistakes over a long period that have to do with political reputation as much as with the practicalities of gas supply.

Amanda Milling: The point that I want to make is about where we are today and where we have been for the past few days, weeks and months. Let us be honest: the build-up of troops on the border of Ukraine has been happening over some time.

We are committed to bringing forward the economic crime Bill. It will establish a new public register of beneficial ownership of overseas companies and other entities that own or want to buy UK property. It will ensure that individuals and entities can no longer hide in the shadows. It will also include reforms to Companies House that will bear down on the thousands of UK companies and other corporate structures used as vehicles for facilitating international money laundering, including from Russia.

We have increased checks on private flights, customs and freight travel under existing powers to prevent security threats to our people. On 17 February, the Home Secretary took decisive action to shut the tier 1 investor visa route to all new applicants of all nationalities, with immediate effect.

In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine yesterday, we announced our first package of sanctions measures. With immediate effect, we froze the assets of five Russian banks. Four of those banks are involved in bankrolling

[Amanda Milling]

the Russian occupation: Bank Rossiya, which is particularly close to the Kremlin; Black Sea Bank for Development and Reconstruction; IS Bank; and GenBank.

Emma Hardy: Will the Minister give way?

Amanda Milling: Sorry, but I will just make a little progress. [Interruption.] Just a moment—just hold fire for a second, if you do not mind.

The assets of one further bank—Promsvyazbank, the pivotal bank in propping up Russia's defence sector—have also been frozen. We will also freeze the assets of, and impose travel bans on, three oligarchs: Timchenko, Russia's sixth richest oligarch; and Boris and Igor Rotenberg, long-standing associates of the regime.

Emma Hardy: The Minister is being very generous in giving way. I am hearing that apparently No. 10 is telling the media that sanctions on the Duma members who voted are still being finalised because it needs evidence. What more evidence does it possibly need, considering that the EU has already announced that it is sanctioning 351 Members of the Duma?

Amanda Milling: The hon. Lady is very lucky to be looking at her mobile phone. I am not looking at my mobile phone; I am fairly focused on the debate in hand. [Interruption.] I am going to focus on the sanctions that we announced yesterday and the statutory instrument that the House approved.

To go back to my last point, no UK individual business will be able to deal with them until they have returned to Ukrainian control.

Jonathan Edwards: Will the Minister give way?

Amanda Milling: I will make progress, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind. I think I have been pretty generous so far.

Over the coming weeks, we will extend the territorial sanctions imposed on Crimea to territory occupied by Russian forces in the so-called breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. We will also sanction those Members of the Russian Duma and Federation Council who voted to recognise the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk, in flagrant violation of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty.

This will not be the end. Yesterday's announcement was just the start of our upward ratchet.

Rushanara Ali: The Minister has repeated the points made yesterday about sanctions against banks. Can she explain to the House what her Government will do to sanction the large state-owned banks? If we sanctioned Sberbank, VTB and Gazprombank, for example, as well the non-state owned Alfa bank, it would actually have a serious impact on the Russian Government. At the moment, we are neither here nor there.

Amanda Milling: I am not going to speculate on further sanctions. That is normal, standard Government policy, because to do so would undermine future sanctions. All I will say is that this will not be the end. Should Russia stage any further invasion into Ukraine, we will

not hesitate to implement a comprehensive and unprecedented package of sanctions in close co-ordination with allies around the world.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Amanda Milling: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I would like to make a little progress.

That package of sanctions will include measures to stop the Kremlin's access to UK financial markets for sovereign debt, which means the Russian Government will be unable to access UK services to raise capital through the issuing and trading of sovereign debt. These measures will curtail the ability of the Russian state, and Russian companies, to raise funds on our markets, and will further isolate Russian banks' ability to operate internationally. We will also introduce measures to limit Russia's ability to trade internationally, and to degrade the development of its military industrial base for years to come. We will keep ratcheting up the pressure, targeting more banks, elites and companies that are of significance to the Kremlin.

Jonathan Edwards *rose—*

Wayne David *rose—*

Amanda Milling: I will give way to the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards), because he has been quite persistent.

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful to the Minister. Is there not a danger that the UK has taken a peashooter to a bazooka contest? As we are targeting a few individuals and a few peripheral banks, the Kremlin can sit back and allow oil and gas prices to rise, which will hit every single household in the UK.

Amanda Milling: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and also for his persistence. As I have said, this is the first tranche of measures, and we are prepared to go further.

In conclusion, as we have shown consistently in recent years, and in recent days, the UK takes the threat of international illicit finance, including that from Russia, extremely seriously. We have taken decisive action to demonstrate that corrupt elites and individuals who seek to exploit our financial systems to hide their illegitimate wealth are not welcome in the UK, and we can and will go further to ensure that the UK is safeguarded from these threats.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Chris Bryant: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Are you able to help me? I may have inadvertently misled the House earlier today when I said in a point of order that the Prime Minister was intending to correct the record of what he had said yesterday regarding whether Roman Abramovich had or had not been sanctioned—the Prime Minister said yesterday that he had, but I think he now admits that he has not. I was told by one of the Prime Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretaries yesterday afternoon that he was going to write to me, and that there would be an apology. I gather that a version of the Prime Minister's apology was submitted a while ago for a clarification, as is standard practice for Ministers, but I understand that

has now been withdrawn. So the Prime Minister was going to correct the record, but now he is correcting correcting the record by not correcting the record. Can you confirm that that is the case, Madam Deputy Speaker?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order but, to be perfectly honest, I am having difficulty in grasping what his actual question is. He has asked me to confirm something, but I would have to be absolutely certain what it was that I was confirming before I could say that I was confirming it. This is a very serious matter and I want to make sure that we get the facts correct. I am told that a written ministerial statement has now been published and is available online. It might be that that contains the information for which the hon. Gentleman is searching. I am quite sure that if the record requires to be corrected, the Prime Minister will have it corrected.

Chris Bryant: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I just wonder whether that is the correct procedure for a Minister. Normally we have a specific procedure in the House for correcting the record, which is only available to Ministers, so it would seem very odd to have sent forward a correction of the record through the standard process and now suddenly to divert down a completely different route, namely a written ministerial statement. My understanding was that written ministerial statements were normally announced in advance, rather than being suddenly sprung on the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is making, and there does seem to be some confusion. My understanding is that the written ministerial statement, which the hon. Gentleman is suggesting has been withdrawn, has not been withdrawn, and that it stands. Does that help the hon. Gentleman?

Chris Bryant: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. No, I am sorry, but it does not. As I understand it, earlier this afternoon, during this debate, the Prime Minister submitted a correction to the record, as is standard practice for a Minister who has misled the House inadvertently—in those circumstances, Ministers correct the record. As far as I know, this is the first time the Prime Minister has chosen to do so—hurrah.

What I understand you now to be saying, Madam Deputy Speaker, is that instead of correcting the record—which is the standard, proper process for a Minister—the Prime Minister has decided to table a written ministerial statement. As I understand it, written ministerial statements are only meant to be tabled when they have been announced in advance on the Order Paper, and, as far as I am aware, that is not available.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Now I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is making. I have to say that I think it is better that I tell the truth to the House, because I am not aware of exactly what this situation is, but I will immediately, by the methods available to me, find out precisely what the situation is, because—I note that those on the Government Front Bench are agreeing with me—it is very important that the information available to the House, to the Chamber and more widely is correct and accurate. I have a great appreciation

of the point made by the hon. Gentleman. I want to make sure that the information I give to the House is accurate, and as I do not have it at my fingertips, I will find it and announce it as soon as I possibly can.

Now, where were we? I call Alison Thewliss.

1.45 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sorry that you were drawn into such a Pythonesque sketch show, but it is indicative of some aspects of the situation that I feel we are in with the Government today. They are absolutely all over the place on this issue. I could not quite believe it when the Minister said that the Government were taking it seriously, because we would not be here today if there were any sense whatsoever that they were taking it seriously. They have not taken it seriously, and that has been the case for years.

I thank the official Opposition for initiating the debate. It seems as though we have spoken a fair amount about economic crime in the past few weeks, but this motion could not be more topical or more significant.

During the sanctions debate yesterday afternoon, Members on both sides of the House rightly made clear that we have no quarrel with the people of Russia, and I want to start by reiterating that today. The cities of Glasgow and Rostov-on-Don have been twinned since 1986, hosting exchanges and working together to build bonds of friendship.

Rostov-on-Don now finds itself on the Russian frontline, and my thoughts are with residents there, as well as, of course, with all those in Ukraine, who must be very fearful of what more is to come after eight years of hostile action taken by Russian forces. We on these Benches are very clear about the fact that Ukraine and its sovereignty must be respected, and its people protected from Russian aggression.

I found it striking yesterday afternoon that Members in all parts of the House—perhaps forbye the Minister—were standing up to say that sanctions against five banks and three individuals were not enough. They are quite clearly not enough. These individuals have been on the US sanctions list since 2018, and are hardly likely to find this additional step a surprise or, indeed, an inconvenience.

It was billed that, post Brexit, the UK would be able to act in a nimble fashion and sanction more and more individuals as it saw fit, but it seems that we are not even going as far as the EU. Germany's ending of Nord Stream 2 yesterday was a hugely significant move. European Union Foreign Ministers agreed unanimously on Tuesday to sanction 27 Russians and entities, as well banks and the defence sector, and to limit Russian access to European capital markets. The EU's measures will also target as many as 351 members of the Russian Duma, as well as individuals and businesses linked to Russian actions in the separatist regions.

I appreciate that the Prime Minister said during Prime Minister's questions, and the Foreign Secretary said this morning, that they will escalate sanctions in the event of full-scale invasion, but by that time it will be far too late.

Wayne David: Does the hon. Member agree that it is important that, as far as possible, Britain acts in concert with its allies, and that it is therefore strange that the

[Wayne David]

Government have come forward with a very weak package of sanctions while the European Union has a very strong package?

Alison Thewliss: I agree completely. This package is very weak, and commentators across the board have described it as very weak.

Jonathan Edwards: Does this whole crisis not demonstrate the strategic malfunction of the Conservative party's obsession with the European Union over the years, especially given all the negative energy that has consumed politics in this place over the last five years in the fallout from Brexit? We have taken our eye off the ball when it comes to the biggest foreign policy challenges that the UK—the state—faces.

Alison Thewliss: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct on that. There is a real need to work together on this, but the UK has been several steps behind, unfortunately.

I note with interest that it was reported that shares in Russia's two biggest banks went up yesterday, in relief that they had not been targeted. The five banks targeted represent a mere fraction of the Russian banking sector. Only one of the five is on the Russian central bank's list of systemically important credit institutions. The Black Sea bank is Russia's 197th largest bank by assets, IS bank is 155th and GenBank is 92nd. They were hardly the biggest fish to go after. Ministers have assured us that there will be a ratchet process, but it feels to many that they are not moving fast enough or taking enough action to make a real impact here. Those cronies and oligarchs who have money to shift will no doubt be doing so already. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Dmytro Kuleba, has tweeted this morning:

"To stop Putin from further aggression, we call on partners to impose more sanctions on Russia now. First decisive steps were taken yesterday, and we are grateful for them. Now the pressure needs to step up to stop Putin. Hit his economy and cronies. Hit more. Hit hard. Hit now."

The UK Government should listen to that plea from our allies.

There was much talk during the recent statements of military action and of sending tanks and guns, and while that might be of immediate assistance in an escalating scenario with tens of thousands of Russian troops on the march, we must not neglect to tackle the long-standing scandal on the doorstep of this Parliament that has allowed President Putin to gather his strength and finance his corrupt regime. What frustrates me, other colleagues across this House, anti-corruption experts in the field and the Glasgow Central constituents who email me is the lack of action and urgency on illicit finance. The UK Government alone have this responsibility, but they have not taken the ample opportunities they have had over the years to stop the flow of Russian dirty money through the City of London. The Minister for Security and Borders, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) told the Treasury Committee that he was not happy, and we are not happy either. The Government could have taken stronger measures in the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill Committee, on which I sat. They did not do so. They have their registration of overseas entities Bill, which is still waiting for action. They have had ample

opportunity to reform Companies House and to tackle Scottish limited partnerships and the lack of investment in enforcement agencies. People are getting away with this corruption through a lack of proper enforcement.

One of the most egregious examples is the Russian laundromat case, in which some 113 Scottish limited partnerships played critical roles in a massive Russian money-laundering scheme that moved \$20.8 billion out of Russian banks. One of those involved was Igor Putin, cousin to the Russian president. I would like to pay tribute to my former colleague in this House, Roger Mullin, who did so much to tackle the scourge of the misuse of SLPs, along with the researcher Richard Smith and the journalist David Leask. The UK Government's actions to tackle that were painfully slow and they have still not nailed the issue of the abuse of SLPs or the lack of enforcement on persons of significant control. Money has been taken from Ukraine recently via SLPs as well. Some £36 million in a scam being investigated by authorities last year ended up in the bank account of the SLP Remini Consulting.

Let us not kid ourselves: this is profitable business. The lack of enforcement has allowed an industry to flourish unchecked in the leagues of enablers right here in the UK. The journalist David Leask has pointed out:

"The mundane, unhappy reality is that we have outright crooks and a fair number of white-collar professionals happy not to look too closely at where money comes from. These 'enablers' here"—in Scotland—

"and in England are a threat to the UK and to the wider world. They corrode our democracy and distort our markets. And they are laced throughout our society. They are company formation specialists, corporate lawyers and accountants who provide financial services to oligarchs, gangsters and corrupt politicians. They rarely think of themselves as bent. But that is what they are, ethically if not legally."

The UK Government cannot talk seriously about tackling illicit finance if they do not go after those who enable it. They ought to start by looking in their own coffers for the donations with dubious sources and for those whose funds allow them to come into the Government's inner circle. The Conservative party has accepted nearly £2 million in donations of Russian-linked money since the Prime Minister came into office in 2019, with a quarter of the Cabinet reportedly having Russian-linked donations. The Prime Minister and the Minister said that these were legitimate donations from British citizens, but handing them golden visas first, before getting the money, completely undermines the whole principle. I have constituents who have waited years for a visa, but anyone with enough money can waltz right in and do what they like.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The hon. Lady and I both sat and listened with increasing incredulity during the Treasury Committee hearings on economic crime. Does she share my frustration at the Government's seeming inability to act on any of their stated concerns?

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. The evidence is so clear but the action is non-existent. It just is not being done.

Stewart Hosie: On the issue of golden visas, prior to the tiered scheme there was the old UK investor visa, which was introduced in 1994. It ran from the end of the Major years through Blair, Brown, Cameron and all

the Prime Ministers since, and now the tier 1 visa scheme has been done away with. Is my hon. Friend as frustrated as I am, given that the issue of dirty Russian money is not new, that the action is always too late and never quite enough?

Alison Thewliss: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. The Government are several steps behind those who wish to bend the rules and wash their money through the City of London.

This morning, in response to questioning about a photo taken with Lubov Chernukhin, the wife of Putin's former Finance Minister, the Foreign Secretary said:

"I think we've got to be very careful to distinguish between those who are supporters of the regime, those who are propping up Vladimir Putin and those people who may have moved from Russia years ago and who are part of the British political system."

I would gently suggest to the Government that when those oligarchs and good pals of President Putin are seen by the British Foreign Secretary as being "part of the British political system", it really does illustrate the scale of difficulty that the Conservative party has got itself into.

Chris Bryant: On that particular individual, it does seem odd that dual nationals can give vast amounts of money, especially when they have hidden nearly all of their assets from clear view and when, on top of that, it is pretty clear that a lot of their ownership has sprung from their time spent prospering under Putin.

Alison Thewliss: That is absolutely correct. No questions seem to be asked about where this money has come from, the legitimacy of it or even who it really belongs to in the end.

A notable absence from the Prime Minister's sanctions announcement was any commitment to extend them to those Tory party donors. Maximilian Hess, a fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, has described some Russian business people as

"a champagne glass removed from Westminster's political elite".

And it comes to Scotland too. At a Tory black and white ball in 2018, the then Scottish Conservative leader, Ruth—now Baroness—Davidson, auctioned off a lunch with herself to Lubov Chernukhin, who bid £20,000 to win it. It is said that Baroness Davidson has not yet even come good on that lunch, but if the £20,000 has been accepted, it is a significant donation, whether or not sandwiches, cakes and tea have been taken.

The Prime Minister repeatedly refused to allow publication of the report by Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee in the run-up to the 2019 general election. *The Times* quoted sources suggesting that his reluctance was due to his embarrassment at the links the Committee had discovered between Conservative party donors and the Kremlin. His Government have yet to act on the recommendations of that report. To make matters worse, the Tories' Elections Bill will water down the Electoral Commission and make foreign donations easier, so their denial just now, stating that it is not foreign money, is not even going to stand when that Bill comes into force.

Emma Hardy: The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech. Does she share my concern that when the Prime Minister's spokesperson was questioned about these

donations, they just repeated the same answer, which was that due diligence had been met, but when they were asked what that due diligence actually consisted of and what was involved in it, they were unable to give an answer?

Alison Thewliss: Yes, the hon. Lady is absolutely correct. It is a disrespect to everybody who donates with honesty to political parties in this country—those small donors who give a tenner or put money into a raffle—that so little is asked about these absolutely massive donations that go to the heart of our democracy and compromise the very place in which we sit today.

The Government must also act on the economic crime Bill. We heard earlier that it would be introduced in the next Session. We have heard before that it will be introduced when parliamentary time allows. Well, there has been tons of parliamentary time over these past couple of years and yet no economic crime Bill. The disappearance of that Bill was part of the reason that Lord Agnew resigned as the Minister for economic crime.

We have not yet seen the Government's registration of overseas entities Bill. The register of overseas entities was supposed to be up and running last year, but we are still waiting to see the legislation. I sat on the Joint Committee on the draft Bill, and this morning I dug out the Committee's papers and our report to refresh my memory. The Committee made suggestions to improve the Bill by closing loopholes such as trusts and introducing verification, the lack of which makes the current register at Companies House so utterly useless and full of guff.

Lord Faulks, the former Conservative Minister who chaired the Joint Committee, recently revealed that, under the previous Prime Minister, Downing Street leant on him when he tabled amendments to introduce a public register of overseas property owners. He said:

"I was obviously misled because nothing has subsequently happened. I can only think a deluded desire to protect the City of London has led to all these delays."

It is a real irony that our reputation for protecting the rule of law is one of the things that attracts people who have very little regard for the rule of law themselves and come from countries which ignore it almost altogether."

That is the nature of the money being attracted.

Meanwhile, the anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International has said that Russians accused of corruption or of links to the Kremlin own around £1.5 billion-worth of property in Britain, 28% of it in the City of Westminster on the doorstep of British democracy.

This House is united in our cross-party support for the Government and people of Ukraine. Members across the House want to see more action by way of sanctions against those involved in Putin's regime, but this report rings hollow when this Government have, time and again, failed to take action to halt the flow of dirty money through the City of London, tarnishing both credibility and reputation.

The Scottish Parliament does not have the powers to act on this, although my colleagues and I dearly wish it did. This UK Government have a chance to put that right, and they must do so without further delay, else the stream of questions as to why not and who benefits will become a flood.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) made a perfectly reasonable point of order, and I could not give a clear answer. As I consider it to be extremely important that information given in the House, particularly from the Chair, should always be absolutely clear, I would like to make clear the proper answer to his question.

The hon. Gentleman is concerned that the Prime Minister sought to clarify, by means of a written ministerial statement today, something that he said in the House yesterday. That is perfectly proper. The written ministerial statement was notified on today's Order Paper and has since been properly published. It has not been withdrawn, so it stands. It says:

"Further to my answer to the Rt Hon member for Barking during my oral statement on Ukraine, it is the position that oligarchs at the heart of Putin's inner circle and banks which have bankrolled the Russian occupation of Crimea have been targeted by the first wave of UK sanctions in response to Russia's further violation of Ukraine's sovereignty. As I said in my answer, these include Gennady Timchenko, Russia's sixth richest oligarch, to whom she referred in her question, and Boris and Igor Rotenberg, two long-standing associates of the regime. In the event of further aggressive acts by Russia against Ukraine, we have prepared an unprecedented package of further sanctions ready to go. Further details can be found at: UK hits Russian oligarchs and banks with targeted sanctions: Foreign Secretary's statement—GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

Roman Abramovich has not been the subject of targeted measures.

More generally anyone who comes to this country on an Israeli passport is a non-visa national. Israelis are required to obtain a visa if they want to live, work or study in the UK."

I hope that clarifies the position and that the hon. Member for Rhondda will be pleased the matter is now absolutely clear. *[Interruption.]* We will have no more on this. I have clarified it.

2.5 pm

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The second half of the Opposition's motion relates to the economic crime Bill and, as many do, I have great sympathy with the points raised by hon. Members on both sides of the House over a period of time. I look forward to the economic crime Bill being introduced, and I think we could go further. We could provide further resources for the National Crime Agency, which has asked for them, and many of us on both sides of the House are underwhelmed by the extent of the British sanctions so far in response to what is clearly a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

It may be that we are not party to deliberations on the calibration of the response from western allies, and it may be that Nord Stream 2 was phase one and the City of London withdrawing its facilities will be a further step. In the absence of knowing what those deliberations are, the Government, on the face of it, have clearly not done enough in response through these petty, small sanctions considering the scale of the crime itself—the invasion of a sovereign, democratic country. With Members on both sides of the House having called it out as an illegal invasion of a sovereign country, we should remember that it is not a one-off. This Russian aggression started with the invasion of Georgia in 2008. Not everybody outside this place knows that 20% of the country of Georgia, a fifth, is still occupied by Russian troops. We tend not to dwell on that too often, but it has been followed by the annexation of

Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine. It is abundantly clear that Russian aggression must be met with the strongest possible response, including by providing the Ukrainian Government with all the means required to defend themselves.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Given that Georgia was 2008 and Crimea was 2014, should we not have been better prepared for sanctions?

Mr Baron: I told the House yesterday that I think we should have stronger sanctions. And it is not just about stronger sanction, as we also need stronger defence and more defence spending.

In the absence of any knowledge about the calibration of our response—that is not to say it does not exist—the sanctions were pitifully woeful. Many hon. Members on both sides of the House have been very underwhelmed by them.

We need to do everything we can to provide the Ukrainian Government with all the means required to defend themselves. That means economic support and additional supplies of lethal weapons with which to protect their sovereignty, primarily and hopefully to act as a deterrent but also, if it comes to it, for use in battle. If Russia does invade, there will be an ongoing resistance to support. NATO must also continue its programme of beefing up deployments across eastern Europe, the high north and the Black sea. We must show to Russia that NATO is serious about protecting its members, and we must remind Russia of our article 5 undertaking.

There are people in this country who say this is overly aggressive, but we should make it absolutely clear in this place that we do not seek conflict. I was a soldier back in the 1980s, and I remind the House that I have consistently voted against our military interventions over the past two decades. I opposed war in Iraq, believing that we went to war on a false premise. I opposed the morphing of the mission in Afghanistan after we had got rid of al-Qaeda in 2001. I was the only Conservative MP to vote against our Libyan intervention. And I opposed trying to arm certain sections of the rebels in Syria, as I felt that we underestimated the task at hand and that those weapons would have fallen into the wrong hands. I was opposed to all of that, but, as a former soldier, I also recognise that strong armed forces are the best way of deterring aggression.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On deterrence after the fall of the Soviet Union, this political state, along with a range of other western states, gave opportunity for finance through oligarchy yet ignored ordinary Russians. Does the hon. Gentleman not think that if we had supported ordinary Russians to get the benefits of freedom and liberty in the west through golden visas for them, we would not now have 190,000 Russian troops on the borders of Ukraine?

Mr Baron: That is a bit of a tenuous link. Let us be clear: an aggressor is going to consider invading a country regardless of what visas have been given in a third country. Having said that, I agree that we need to look at this, and I made that point clear when I first stood up.

We need to be clear that we need strong defence. One reason I opposed those recent interventions over the past 20 years is because I felt that they distracted us

from the real business of countering traditional state-on-state threats. War should always be a means of last resort, once all other avenues have been exhausted, but the real danger was state-on-state threats, including Russia and, increasingly, an assertive China. We all know that jaw-jaw is better than war-war, but jaw-jaw is most effective when supported and backed up by strong armed forces, because potential adversaries then listen. After a decade of hollowing out our defence capabilities and cutting the number of soldiers, we need to get serious about defence and reverse those trends. The Prime Minister is right to say that we have had the largest increase in the defence budget since the end of the cold war—we are standing at about 2.4%, if we believe Government figures—but I suggest that we need to do much more. We still have the smallest Army since the Napoleonic times, if not before. We still have too few ships able to guard our aircraft carriers, and our air defences are thin. As a former soldier, I can promise the House that there is no substitute for boots on the ground. I buy the technology argument—everything about drones and how we have to be up to speed with cyber and all the rest—but there is no substitute for boots on the ground if we want to dominate ground. That is a simple fact.

I ask the Government to seriously think about this, but I also ask the Opposition to do so. For 20 years I have been in this place and I have banged on, together with others, on both sides of the House, about the need for increased defence spending. That has largely fallen on deaf ears. Some Opposition Members will remember that in 2013 I led the revolt from those on the Government Benches on the Bill that became the Defence Reform Act 2014, which was cutting regular troops and trying to replace them with reservists. With the help of the Scottish nationalists and Labour, we tried to get the Government to think again. Unfortunately, I was unable to carry a sufficient number of Conservative Members, but we came close. So I am not standing here being a hypocrite and suggesting this in a way to try to make party political points. I am asking the Labour party, the official Opposition, to do something. The establishment in this country still does not get it on defence. We need a substantial and sustained increase in defence spending, to act as a deterrent, not to be used in an offensive manner. Deterrence is the best way.

The Labour party has a very proud history in this area. It was a Labour Government who signed us up to NATO and who were determined that we had a nuclear deterrent. I suggest to the official Opposition that we need to start at 3% for defence spending but not tie this to a particular percentage of GDP, because GDP fluctuates. We need to start at 3% and then build on it, because we are entering an era where there is a battle for democracy yet to be had. I hope I am not being too dramatic when I say that. We need strong armed forces for that, and the Labour party, the official Opposition, has a role in this.

Having these debates is great, but we have had them so many times before about defence spending and other issues and interventions. If the Labour party was to say, “We are going to commit to a substantial and sustainable level of defence spending”, it would move the dial in the debate. The official Opposition would be surprised at just how much support there is on the Conservative Benches for a substantial increase in defence spending—well above the 2.4% figure we heard bandied about by the Prime Minister yesterday. The official Opposition have

an opportunity to move the dial on this, and I encourage them to take it. This is an important issue on the doorstep, contrary to what many people suggest; people are proud of their armed forces. There is also an opportunity to be a force of good for the Union, as we are proud of our armed forces across the four nations of the UK.

I am conscious that others wish to speak, but may I briefly return to this point about the new era we have now entered with regard to the battle for democracy? We believed that democracy would sweep the field after the cold war, because it was blatantly obvious that it was the right thing, but democracy is a fragile concept. We fundamentally believe in it in this place, but let us never underestimate the number of oligarchs and totalitarian individuals out there—states, even—who want to overthrow democracy. We have to nurture, encourage and protect it. But what are we doing? We have a weak foreign policy when it comes to potential aggressors, and not just potential ones; when there is an invasion of a sovereign country we are debating quite petty sanctions. We need to step up to the plate.

I also suggest to the House that this is not just about hard power—quite the contrary, as the cold war was won largely because we won the soft power battle. We need to further finance our diplomatic sources and our diplomacy generally. One reason why I voted against the Libyan intervention, when I was the only Tory to do so and was very unpopular with my own party, was because we simply did not know what was happening on the ground. We did not have the diplomats there kicking the tyres and feeling the dust. We used to have great expertise in this area but we have hollowed it out, through cuts, and those cuts can be counterproductive. They can be a false economy. If we do not know what is happening on the ground, these decisions are much riskier. Satellites and technology take us only so far; we need experts on the ground.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I concur with what my hon. Friend was saying a moment ago about the need for the Labour party to commit to greater defence spending. Labour Members often challenge us about the need to increase development spending and I agree with them on that. He mentions diplomacy as well, and I wonder whether there is the opportunity for a cross-party agreement on sustained investment in our defence and our diplomatic service, and restoring development spending to 0.7% as soon as possible—and perhaps even going beyond it? I wonder whether there is an opportunity to increase all of our commitments to the international community and perhaps achieve a cross-party consensus.

Mr Baron: I thank my hon. Friend for the intervention, and I certainly think there is greater scope for cross-party consensus on these key issues. We come together in condemnation of Russia and events such as this, but we need also to come together on such things as defence spending and diplomatic spending.

Let me return to soft power. I am chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on the British Council, and I know that some Members on the Opposition Benches have served with the British Council. We work together in trying to promote the interests of the British Council, but let me cite a further example of where we are going wrong as a country. Last year, the Government failed to meet the £10 million shortfall between the British Council’s commercial activities—predominantly

[Mr Baron]

the teaching of English in the far east, mostly in China—and the money the Government supplied. That £10 million shortfall has resulted in the closure of 20 country operations. That is not global Britain or the furthering of the interests of soft power. The British Council is a key instrument of our soft power capability. We are a soft power superpower, but we should never take that for granted.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): My hon. Friend is taking us on a journey. I appreciate the point he made about increased military spending and an increase in boots on the ground in our armed forces, but does he feel that we as Members of Parliament do not have the full facts, whereas Ministers and officials do and see far more than we do? It is not necessarily right to criticise them for what they may or may not have seen. On top of that, we should be aware that there must be a sliding scale in respect of the sanctions on Russia. We cannot put everything on Russia all at once; we have to see how the situation develops.

Mr Baron: I am afraid my hon. Friend has greater faith than I have. We have an excellent civil service and, by and large, parties on both sides of the Chamber have supplied good Ministers, but I would not have blind faith in every single Minister or official. The bottom line is that we are making cuts when there should not be cuts. When it comes to the calibration of the response, what my hon. Friend says may be the case, but there has been no calibration of the response since Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. There has been absolutely nothing, so I would not necessarily assume that we should suddenly come round and say there must be a calibration now.

I have had the nod from Madam Deputy Speaker, so I am conscious that I need to move on. On the issue of soft power, in addition to the closure of 20 country operations last year, we face further country closures this year because, despite the FCDO's budget going up 21% in the comprehensive spending review, the British Council's budget is, believe it or not, falling again, stirring up questions about cuts.

In conclusion, in taking on the oligarchs and those who do not believe in democracy, we have to have a rounded response. We need to increase defence spending—I have called on the Labour party to help us to move the dial on that and to work in as cross-party a fashion as possible; we need more money for the diplomatic service; and we need to make sure we fund every avenue of our soft power capability, because it is going to be a battle of minds and ideas as much as it is going to be a battle of hard power.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I hope we can manage without a formal time limit. If everybody takes around six minutes, we will manage without one, but if that does not happen, I shall put on a time limit.

2.22 pm

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron). I wish to focus a bit more on the economic

crime and money laundering aspect of today's debate, because we talked about sanctions last night and the political situation has been well covered.

I am a member of the Treasury Committee. A couple of weeks ago we published our 11th report of the Session, which is before the House, and we await the Government's response with interest. It was frustrating to take evidence for that report in the knowledge that in 2019 our predecessor Committee had come up with detailed recommendations on dealing with the issues of money laundering, economic crime and fraud that were then becoming a problem, only for us to have seen the levels of all those crimes rise rapidly from 2019 and onwards into the pandemic, costing this country billions of pounds.

Others have pointed out how we allow London to be described as a laundromat for dirty Russian money, which is what the Intelligence and Security Committee's Russia report told us was the case when it was published in 2020, after a significant delay that was down to the Prime Minister's not allowing it to be published. It is frustrating to be two years further on from that report and to see no effective response to many of the things it said. If the Minister had come to the Dispatch Box and said, as a result of this debate, "We've seen the Russia report; we've been a bit tardy but we're now going to put its recommendations into effect", I would have been reassured. Yesterday, I asked the Prime Minister whether, in the light of Putin's actions in Ukraine, he would do that, but he did not answer in the affirmative.

We are, then, in a situation in which London can still be described as a laundromat for dirty Russian money. It is now seen as the jurisdiction of choice for dirty money. One of the most vivid things I recall from when the Treasury Committee sought evidence for its report on economic crime was the ministerial evidence we were given. Ministers provided no satisfaction whatsoever that proper progress was being made. Where is the hold-up? Where is the blockage that is preventing what should be obvious progress from being made? Some measures have been announced for years and years, yet we have seen no proper or legislative progress.

We all welcome our City's importance as a financial centre, but it is now being compromised by a baffling lack of urgency in dealing with economic crime. Our security is being threatened by international criminal gangs, kleptocrats and terrorist financing, yet the Government seem to have become fixated on describing complex processes rather than acting to stop their outcome, which is rising levels of economic crime and fraud, affecting many of our constituents when they are scammed out of hard-earned money.

Anthony Mangnall: I apologise for interrupting the hon. Lady and for not having read that report. Did it include anything on the reform of Companies House to include more transparency in respect of ownership and structures? That is a huge issue.

Dame Angela Eagle: Perhaps the hon. Member should read the report, which is very comprehensive. If he had read it, he would know that it did indeed deal with that issue. It is something that we have been talking about, and our predecessor Committee was talking about, for a very long time, yet there is still no action. Apparently, the Chancellor has put aside a little money

and the Government are talking about doing something in 2023-24. Our predecessor Committee was talking about this in 2019. Nothing has happened. Why has nothing happened?

We urgently need greater transparency, tougher regulation and tougher enforcement. As others have said, we need to introduce an open register of beneficial ownership of companies. The Prime Minister repeats that that is what the Government are doing, but there is no sign of it. David Cameron promised one in 2015 to get him through a G20. The legislation exists in draft—the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) served on the Joint Committee on it and read it in minute detail—but there is still no progress. The Prime Minister reiterated that we were going to have an open register of beneficial ownership of companies to get him through the G7 in 2020, but there is still no sign of it. Why? We have enough time. The Prime Minister has had offers from the Opposition to facilitate the passage of legislation quickly to get it on the statute book, but the will does not seem to be there.

We need an economic crime Bill. Lord Agnew, who was responsible—you could not make it up, Madam Deputy Speaker—for fighting fraud in the Treasury, resigned at the Dispatch Box in the House of Lords in frustration because he could not perceive any urgency or determination to tackle the rising levels of fraud in the pandemic support schemes. He was so aghast at the lack of willingness there seemed to be in the Government that he felt he had to resign to “smash some crockery”, as he put it.

We need reform of the corporate liability law to crack down on money laundering and facilitation of this kind of crime in the banks. We need to deal with the urgent reform of Companies House. I have already discussed this. It is on the Government's so-called agenda year after year after year. People can still create a company at Companies House, say that the owner of it is Vladimir Putin or Mickey Mouse and nobody will tell them not to do it. They can then use that to defraud various people and launder their cash. This is a joke and there is still no urgency in dealing with it.

We need to deal with the fragmentation of law enforcement if we are to deal with economic crime. No one part of the law seems to have any kind of coherent responsibility for enforcing it, so even if we had tougher regulation, we do not have the enforcement muscle to make sure that we get the outcome. Why are the Government dragging their feet? Why are they so ineffectual? Why is there no measurement of the outcome? Why do we have this kind of benign neglect as the forces of darkness gather, as they focus on laundering their dirty money through the City of London? We know how this affects people in terms of property prices. How can we have sanctions if we do not know who owns the companies that the money is flowing through? This has to be dealt with. The problem is getting far, far more urgent than it has ever been before. Our democracy is at stake and we expect this Government, finally, to get off their backside and do something about it.

2.31 pm

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I thank and congratulate the Opposition on bringing forward this debate. It is a very, very important and timely matter. I am impressed by the unanimity that has been shown across the House

in response to what is happening in eastern Europe and by the support that has been given to the Government's measures so far.

The shadow Foreign Secretary said earlier that the world is watching to see whether the west meets this test, and he is absolutely right. The Foreign Secretary said recently that there has been a decade of drift in regard to Russia, and, sadly, that is true as well, but that is no longer the case. I applaud the measures that have been announced: the clampdown on the activities of the oligarchs in the UK; the suspension of banking; and the restrictions on the Russian state and Russian companies from raising debt in London markets.

What more can and should be done? Yes, we must take resolute action to get illicit Russian money out of the City. I was powerfully struck by what the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) said about Companies House. From my constituency work, I have become very conscious of the deficiencies of the system there and the ability that fraudsters have to establish companies. There is also a danger from a security perspective, so action must be taken, and I am sure that the Government are hearing that.

Many Members and commentators have suggested that Russian trading should be suspended through the SWIFT banking system. I defer to others on that, but I do just observe the potential economic turmoil that that would induce and recognise that it might be necessary for us to experience pain in this country, even at a time when our own economy is fragile and when the cost of living is going up. We recognise that, because of the decade of drift that the west has allowed to take place in Russia, there may be economic pain in consequence.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that SWIFT is a messaging system between banks, so cutting off other Russian banks from the messaging system is not quite the nuclear option that people suggest it is, although it would complicate matters?

Danny Kruger: As I said, I defer to others on that, but I thank my hon. Friend for that information.

The same applies to the impact on wholesale gas prices, which will naturally ensue as European countries in particular restrict their imports of Russian gas. That is necessary. Thankfully, we are not dependent on Russian gas to the same extent as our friends in Europe. I commend Germany for its brave decision to suspend Nord Stream 2. I hope that that will become a permanent commitment.

The Opposition accuse us of not doing enough. Of course there can, should and will be more steps taken, but I invite them to consider what they would be saying if we had shot off every measure possible all in one go, without consultation and without collaboration with our partners. They would be accusing us, no doubt, of precipitate, hasty action and of lack of partnership with our allies. We would probably be accused of Brexit Britain little Englandism, impotent sabre rattling, and trying to distract attention from political problems at home. They would be making those accusations if we were shooting off every possible measure in the book. Actually what we are doing is taking deliberate action. We should not mistake a measured approach for a lack of resolution. On the contrary, this is a steady, deliberate

[Danny Kruger]

ramping up of the sanctions that are necessary, in partnership with our allies. This is the responsible way to proceed. It is the way that this Government proceeded when the Russian state attacked people on the streets of this country in Salisbury in my county of Wiltshire. It was the right action to take. It took a little while to convene an international response to that, but it was the right one.

What can we do beyond finance? I applaud the military commitments that have been made in recent months, and particularly those in recent weeks, including: the increase in the military support that we give to Ukraine; our commitment of further troops to Estonia and Poland; the increase in our RAF presence in Cyprus; and the dispatch of warships to the eastern Mediterranean and the Black sea. Those are all the right measures to take. Putin said rather preposterously that Russia was being encircled by NATO. That now will come true because of what he has done. I commend the Government from before this crisis for their increased funding—£20 billion extra—to our armed forces, which includes investment in cyber and in all the grey zone defences that we need to counter the sort of threats that Russia poses. I agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) said a few moments ago. I cannot believe that we do not also need an increase in the number of men and women in uniform able to act as a deterrent to the sort of aggression that we are seeing. As I said in my intervention on him, as a nation, we need to increase development spending, diplomatic spending and defence spending.

I had the honour of meeting some of the soldiers going out to service part of Operation CABRIT in Estonia last year when they were training on Salisbury plain in my constituency. I want to take this opportunity to press for those soldiers to be awarded a campaign medal in recognition of their activities to defend Europe and the west as part of Operation CABRIT. Under the current circumstances, it is extremely necessary and appropriate to recognise that they are not just undertaking a training exercise; they are actually defending Europe and defending the UK. I hope that we will see a medal for our troops who are serving in eastern Europe and that we will increase our armed forces in the years to come.

2.37 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): May I make an observation before I start properly? The Minister for Asia and the Middle East, the right hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling), appeared to suggest earlier that, in the event of further Russian aggression, there would be tougher sanctions. That mirrors the prime ministerial statement that Madam Deputy Speaker read out earlier. However, in the debate on sanctions last night, the Minister for Europe and North America, the right hon. and gallant Member for Braintree (James Cleverly), said that there would be tougher sanctions as a result of what Russia “has already done”. Those two things are not the same. They may just have been slips of the tongue, but what we cannot have is confusion added to the delay, the dither and what many consider to be an already inadequate response. I would add—I think this rather mirrored the mood yesterday and I suspect mirrors the mood today—that Russia has already

invaded and annexed a sovereign state. We do not have to wait until the tanks encircle Kyiv in order to take the necessary sanction action, which it is possible to do.

I very much welcome and support the motion we are debating today. I am glad that it refers to the Intelligence and Security Committee’s Russia report. I had a hand in that report and I am very proud of it. I shall refer to only three paragraphs—all on Russian expatriates. The part entitled “Welcoming oligarchs with open arms” ties in directly to the question of what we do about dirty money. Paragraph 49 begins:

“Whilst the Russian elite have developed ties with a number of countries in recent years, it would appear that the UK has been viewed as a particularly favourable destination for Russian oligarchs and their money. It is widely recognised that the key to London’s appeal was the exploitation of the UK’s investor visa scheme, introduced in 1994,”—

almost 30 years ago—

“followed by the promotion of a light and limited touch to regulation, with London’s strong capital and housing markets offering sound investment opportunities.”

One could easily read that last half-sentence as, “excellent opportunities to launder dirty cash,” because that is precisely what happened.

Paragraph 50 goes on to explain that the UK offered “ideal mechanisms by which illicit finance could be recycled through what has been referred to as the London ‘laundromat’. The money was also invested in extending patronage and building influence across a wide sphere of the British establishment—PR firms, charities, political interests, academia and cultural institutions were all willing beneficiaries of Russian money, contributing to a ‘reputation laundering’ process.”

It was not simply the money that the first generation of oligarchs managed to seize with Yeltsin’s privatisations, but everything that has gone on since then—a “reputation laundering” process.

That leads us to the preposterous situation my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) referred to earlier. When the Foreign Secretary was asked about £2 million of donations to the Tory party—including, the report said, to the Deputy Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer—she said that those donors are

“part of the British political system”,

as if accepting donations of that sort of money was normal. It is not. No matter how many times it has been laundered or how many assets have been purchased and sold and purchased and sold to clean the cash, it is still dirty cash.

I understand perfectly well why a donor would wish to offer money to a political party—it buys them political influence—but I am at a bit of a loss to understand why any political party would accept such money. It does not make that party part of a normal political process; it makes it part of a racket.

The report went on to say that

“there are a lot of Russians with very close links to Putin who are well integrated into the UK business and social scene, and accepted because of their wealth. This level of integration—in ‘Londongrad’ in particular—means that any measures now being taken by the Government are not preventative but rather constitute damage limitation.”

As the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) said earlier, this report was published in July 2020, almost two years ago. Much of the evidence is a year or two older still, and the issue of dirty money predates that. We all know what is going on.

The idea that we have to debate this as part of an Opposition day, rather than actively considering the various pieces of legislation that are necessary, is quite shameful. We have spent enough time on partygate and being ambushed by cake, but when it comes to billions of pounds of stolen cash sloshing about London, we have to talk about it on an Opposition day. That is frankly a disgrace.

That section of the report went on to say:

“It is not just the oligarchs either: the arrival of Russian money resulted in a growth industry of enablers—individuals and organisations who manage and lobby for the Russian elite in the UK. Lawyers, accountants, estate agents and PR professionals have played a role, wittingly or unwittingly, in the extension of Russian influence which is often linked to promoting the nefarious interests of the Russian state. A large private security industry has developed in the UK to service the needs of the Russian elite, in which British companies protect the oligarchs and their families, seek kompromat on competitors, and on occasion help launder money through offshore shell companies and fabricate ‘due diligence’ reports, while lawyers provide litigation support. William Browder—the head of the global Magnitsky justice movement—”

“told the Committee that:

“Russian state interests, working in conjunction with and through criminal private interests, set up a “buffer” of Westerners who become de facto Russian state agents, many unwittingly, but others with a reason to know exactly what they are doing and for whom. As a result, UK actors have to deal with Russian criminal interests masked as state interests, and Russian state interests masked by their Western agents.”

I will conclude by saying that I can think of no stronger justification for the immediate introduction of an economic crime Bill, an overseas entities Bill and the register of beneficial ownership.

2.46 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I will aim my remarks very much through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but at the Minister. There has been a lot of smoke about events; it would be nice if he could give us some light on what will actually be happening.

I am slightly concerned that, broadly speaking, we still do not understand as much as we should about Russian hybrid conflict, about the economics, the military, the espionage, the lawfare, which some hon. Members have referred to, the finance and the propaganda. That is something we should be much more concerned about.

Some hon. Members have talked about Russian past form in this area; I lived in the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet states from 1990 to 1994, and arguably the first time that paramilitaries and front groups were used was in Transnistria in 1991 and the first Georgian war in Abkhazia and South Ossetia between 1991 and 1993. We saw there a simplified version of the much bigger thing we saw in 2014 in eastern Ukraine and the annexation of the Crimea. Arguably even before that, in the dying days of the Soviet Union, the Soviets played an imperial policing role, using similar front groups and violence, in Nagorno-Karabakh as well. This practice is not new and it is very much part of the playbook.

In Ukraine now, the frontline is the border; in Germany, the frontline is the gas pipelines and, as many people have pointed out, the frontline in the UK flows along the Thames to the City of London. There are a series of Bills that it would be useful for the Minister to discuss and for us all to be aware of.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one way to stop that flow up the Thames is to abolish unincorporated associations, which are utilised not only by political parties but by Members of Parliament?

Bob Seely: I do not know enough about that, so I will have to respect the experts’ opinions, but the hon. Gentleman makes a potentially valid point.

I would like us to look at the economic crime Bill; most importantly, given that not enough people are talking about it, I suggest a foreign lobbying Bill. I also respectfully suggest amendments to data protection and libel laws. Many people have already talked about the economic crime Bill, but it is shocking that we have 2,000 UK-registered companies involved in laundering and corruption cases linked to Russia, involving £80 billion—staggering sums of money—and £1.5 billion of property owned by people close to Putin or involved in crime and corruption.

I understand that historically the City wanted a light touch, to be more competitive than New York, but on the back of that light touch we have taken in some very unsavoury kleptocrats and oligarchs, and the tide of dirty money is damaging us. Why on earth do we need a culture of shadowy offshore trusts in this country? In what way does it help? I know it enriches a few thousand people with fancy bonuses, but in what way does it help our national interests? It is great that the Home Secretary has stopped the golden visa scheme, but really that horse bolted a long time ago.

On foreign lobbying laws, the UK is an influence-peddler’s paradise. Oligarchs pay for the best PR and the best reputation-launderers, and they pay for senior politicians to navigate through the rules. I understand that some people are attacking the Conservatives in this regard. I do not support wrongdoing on any side, any more than I support Alex Salmond tarding himself around Russia Today. Does anyone wish to defend Peter Mandelson’s record—

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bob Seely: I will make some progress.

Does anyone here respect Peter Mandelson, or does anyone want to—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman must not directly criticise a Member of Parliament, and that includes peers. I would like him to change his remarks somewhat and make his point without reference to the peer he has just mentioned.

Bob Seely: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Would anyone like to defend the actions of various peers who have defended—

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Maybe we could ask the hon. Gentleman about the £5,000 donation he took from the Conservatives’ Patrons Club, which is an unincorporated association?

Bob Seely: I have a Patrons Club on the Isle of Wight. Their structure is legal. I am afraid I do not know more about it, but if the hon. Gentleman wants more information, I am sure I can find it. I find his remark tediously

[Bob Seely]

parochial and completely out of character with the serious nature of this debate, and more fool him for making it.

Martin Docherty-Hughes *rose*—

Bob Seely: I shall make some progress and not take another intervention, thank you so much.

When we are talking about influence, we need to be talking about the influence that senior peers and former Prime Ministers may offer. These are not unsavoury characters in this country but they are doing some very unsavoury business working for people who know the value of reputation-laundering and of using the City and our legal culture. *The Guardian* takes these things very seriously, and yet on the Scott Trust for many years, and now on *The Guardian's* board, we have Geraldine Proudler. According to Bill Browder, Geraldine Proudler was on the wrong side of the Magnitsky case. She gave legal advice to people involved in allegedly organised crime with a multi-million-pound fraud that was involved ultimately in the murder of Sergei Magnitsky. So again I ask Katharine Viner: if *The Guardian* is so keen to make sure that the Conservatives, and indeed Labour and the SNP, obey high standards in public life, why does Geraldine Proudler sit on the Scott Trust board and now the Guardian Foundation? These are serious questions for those on both sides of the House. I do not defend those peers who have gone to work for Deripaska and other people, but neither should Opposition Members defend those peers who do the wrong thing.

One of the most depressing things about the Intelligence and Security Committee report on Russia was the statement from the National Crime Agency that it felt that it was unable at times to take on certain potentially bad actors because those bad actors' pockets were so deep. I am sorry, but if the NCA is saying that it is unable to uphold the law in this country because of the wealth of the bad people it wants to go after, we are knowingly participating in the undermining of the rule of law in this country, and that is an extraordinarily serious and bad thing to be happening.

We had a great debate on lawfare, and the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) have also talked about it. Some of the most sophisticated law firms in Britain are offering intimidation, kompromat and dirt-digging services to some of the most corrupt people on earth. When we talk about an economic crime Bill or a foreign lobbying Bill, can we also talk about amendments to data protection law and to libel law to ensure that we uphold freedom of speech and ensure that those journalists trying to do the right thing in trying to investigate bad actors are supported by the law and not hounded to financial ruin?

2.54 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I congratulate Labour Front Benchers on calling this debate, because we are required to come together today to discuss, to expose and to unravel what could be the greatest coincidence in British politics. The cynical would say, in the words of Yogi Berra, that it is almost too coincidental to be a coincidence, although of course this House would not hazard such a judgment, but here

it is: on the one hand we have a Government who have presided over the most comprehensive failure to tackle economic crime, which is a failure so profound that we have earned a reputation around the world as one of the world's capitals of money laundering, yet on the other hand we have a flood-tide of money—not £2 million, not £3 million but over £4 million, and counting—that has come into Tory party coffers from generous souls with close ties to Russia. The ministerial code, for what it is worth, says that Ministers are required not only to avoid a conflict of interest but to avoid an appearance of a conflict of interest.

I therefore speak today in a spirit of great generosity to the Minister, because I want to try to extract him from the pickle that he now finds himself in. I am seriously concerned that Tory Ministers are now exposed to the allegation that they are quite simply poodles on roubles. In that spirit of generosity, I want to set out the two problems that the Minister will be required to resolve if he is to escape such an appearance over the weeks, months and years to come. Problem No. 1 is the gaping hole where a plan for tackling economic crime should be. We know the scale of the problem because the National Crime Agency has told us. It says that the scale of economic crime is some £100 billion a year in money laundering and £190 billion lost to fraud—a total of £290 billion. That is a significant chunk of our nation's GDP, so this is not an insignificant problem: it is a monumental problem over which the Government are presiding. Secondly, the reputational damage is so serious that think-tanks in Washington are writing reports saying things like:

“uprooting Kremlin-linked oligarchs will be a challenge given the close ties between Russian money and the United Kingdom's ruling Conservative Party”.

How on earth has the Conservative party got itself into this mess? Well, it is quite a story. I am going to rattle through the 10 key steps that have led the Government to get into this mess. First, they abolished the Minister in charge of economic crime. When the Minister was appointed—[*Interruption.*] Well, he was appointed with the title of Minister for Security and Borders, whereas his predecessor was known as the Minister for Security and Economic Crime. So the Government are taking economic crime so seriously that they deleted it from the title of the Minister who has been asked to wind up this debate.

Secondly, the Government have now tasked not one, not two but 12 different agencies with tackling the problem of economic crime without going to the trouble of appointing someone to be in charge of these 12 different agencies so as to lead the charge. Thirdly, they have neglected to implement 60% of the measures in their own economic crime plan. Going through the list of measures rated “red” by the Royal United Services Institute, some of them are pretty significant, such as making sure that the police get serious about tackling fraud and economic crime.

Next, the Government have starved the National Crime Agency of so many resources that its director general says that it will not take on cases where it thinks the legal costs will be too high. Then they have failed to equip Companies House with the powers to check information sent in by people setting up shell companies. According to the Minister, there are now 11,000 companies on the register that still have not filed returns on who is

the person with significant control, yet how many prosecutions have we had? One hundred and nineteen. It is pathetic; it is lamentable. Then they have failed to bring forward a register of beneficial ownership of property, like the multi-million-pound mansions in Westminster. Then they have failed to use our unique role in the global financial economy to light up where bad actors are doing bad things. SWIFT, the financial messaging system, is based in the UK. We are the global hub, along with New York, of financial settlement worldwide. We could be using the panorama of information to which we have access to light up bad people, to create intelligence packages and then to ensure that those people are pursued to the ends of the earth.

We have failed to stop our courts being used as arenas to silence journalists such as Catherine Belton and Tom Burgis, who are pursuing bad and corrupt companies. Thank God for HarperCollins and Arabella Pike because, frankly, without such brave publishing houses, we would not have the truth brought into the public domain. Then we have the Government's failure to introduce a foreign agents registration Act, despite the fact that it works in America and Australia. To cap it all, they have failed to offer us any kind of hard timetable for the economic crime Bill, which is an omission so serious that they lost their own Minister to it in the House of Lords.

Those 10 elements—this 10-step decent into chaos—is why we now have a situation where the grand total of unexplained wealth orders targeted against oligarchs is zero. Apart from the Magnitsky sanctions, which came from a list of the crimes handed to us in 2007, we have not proposed any sanctions for economic crime against Russian-born individuals since 2014. Some might say that is benign neglect; others might say it is malign neglect; and others might say that the Conservative party has been paid to look the other way.

I am sure we were all reassured by the Secretary of State for Instagram's appearance on "BBC Breakfast" this morning, where she—the Foreign Secretary—told a grateful nation that the Tory party vets its donors and that we must not confuse Russian heritage with proximity to President Putin. I think we would all agree with that, which is why, in the spirit of generosity and helpfulness, I offer my vetting services to those on the Conservative Front Bench this afternoon.

Let us start with Lubov Chernukhin, who has donated £2.1 million. *The Guardian* revealed that her husband, Vladimir, who was appointed deputy chairman of VEB, which was not sanctioned yesterday, received \$8 million from Suleiman Kerimov, who was sanctioned by the US Treasury in 2018. The transfer to Vladimir came on 29 April 2016, mysteriously just before a donation of £1.5 million to the Conservative party. Then there is Alexander Temerko, a man who, it is said,

"forged a career at the top of the Russian arms industry and had connections at the highest levels of the Kremlin".

He was a former deputy chairman of Yukos Oil Company and somehow mysteriously escaped the purge of his colleagues. He has now donated £747,000. He has been working very closely with Viktor Fedotov, a director of Aquind, a source of great largesse to many Members in the House. Mr Fedotov is the former head of a subsidiary of Lukoil, and was revealed in the Pandora papers as a man who, along with two others

"made fortunes from the company in the mid-2000s, around the time it was alleged to have been siphoning funds from the Russian state pipeline monopoly Transneft."

Then we have Dmitry Leus, who has donated £54,000. According to the *Daily Mail*, he was

"found guilty of money laundering and jailed in Russia in 2004. The conviction was later overturned and he insists the prosecution was politically motivated."

Here is the mystery: he also donated to the Prince's Foundation, which has decided to return Mr Leus's money. The House will be amazed to hear that the Conservative party has not.

Then we have Mohammed Amersi. He and his wife have given £793,000 to the Conservative party. The BBC said he was involved in one of Europe's biggest corruption scandals, which entailed \$220 million being paid to a Gibraltar-based company owned by the daughter of the President of Uzbekistan. He has always insisted that his donations came from UK profits, but the *Financial Times* tells us that he

"received \$4m from a company he knew to be secretly owned by a powerful Russian"—

Putin's then telecoms Minister.

Then we have Murtaza Lakhani, whose firm Mercantile & Maritime has donated £500,000. This is the chap who Bloomberg tells us has been revealed as making large parts of his fortune through channelling

"a \$6 billion torrent of cash"

from the Russian oil giant Rosneft to Kurdistan. The money flowed to a company registered in the tax haven of Belize, with a mailing address in Cyprus.

Then we have David Burnside, formerly of this parish. His firm has donated £200,000. Mr Burnside boasts links to senior figures in the Kremlin. *The Guardian* reported that he

"has introduced several prominent Kremlin figures to senior Conservatives",

including Mr Putin's old friend, Vasily Shestakov.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I note that the right hon. Gentleman has a long list. I wonder whether he could just deliver it a little bit faster.

Liam Byrne: I will conclude, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I think my vetting services have been exhausted for the Front Bench. I will conclude by saying that Conservative Ministers are behaving like innocents abroad in a world that is not innocent. No wonder people are now saying that the capital of Londongrad is not Mayfair but Matthew Parker Street, home of Conservative central office. The cruel would say it is 5 Hertford Street, co-owned by Jamie Reuben, scion of the family that made its fortune in the Russian aluminium wars and, as we know, the place where the Foreign Secretary insists on her £3,000 lunches.

The Government have to work harder to persuade us that there is not a coincidence. They have to persuade us that they are not poodles on roubles. They have to bring forward a proper plan for tackling economic crime, not least because of the fact that the financial services industry is worth £165 billion to this country, and it employs millions of people who work hard every day. But we trade on our reputation, and right now, this Government are destroying that reputation for good.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We are doing quite well, but I have to impose an informal time limit of five minutes.

3.5 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I want to make a few short remarks in favour of the motion and expressing my solidarity with our Ukrainian friends, who, as the Prime Minister rightly said,

“threaten no one and ask for nothing except to live in peace and freedom.”—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2022; Vol. 709, c. 175.]

Of course, that is the plight of so many across the globe who find their lands illegally occupied by their neighbours. I applaud our Front-Bench team for bringing this motion to the House, and I endorse entirely the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) in his excellent exposition on this Government’s failures to better regulate, control and monitor the influx of Russian oligarch moneys, among other things.

I have three brief points to make. First, the measures announced by the Prime Minister have been widely criticised as insufficient, and we heard from the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) on that very point, so the criticism is well-founded and widespread. The current extent of the sanctions to three individuals and some banks—we have been told that they are not the major players—is hardly the punitive sanctions that we were led to believe would be imposed.

Time after time, we have seen some Government Members cuddling up to powerful Russians, many of whom have benefited from the break-up of state-owned industries in Russia to the detriment of the Russian people, and it is those Tory politicians who have had direct financial benefit. It seems more than a bit rich for the governing party of this country to talk about sanctioning the sorts of people who have been filling their party political coffers. We have heard mention of Alexander Temerko. It is true that not every Government Member has had funds from that individual, but I ask the vast legions who have had that benefit: what do they think he wants or expects of them?

Secondly, and worse still perhaps, we have just had the Elections Bill go through this House. One of the most dangerous provisions within it, as pointed out by Opposition Members, was the open door to political donations from overseas. This dual citizen route to influencing politics in our country will come back and bite the governing party for some considerable time to come. The Government should understand that there is great scepticism out in the country that they really mean it when they talk about being tough on Russian oligarch money or any other dodgy money coming into British politics.

Finally, I will finish on regulation and control. Undoubtedly, there needs to be a major overhaul of company law, which allows 761 companies to be registered above a takeaway in Somerset, with directors declaring themselves to be “Jesus Christ” or “Adolf Hitler”. Until recently, I thought a slap was a form of physical violence, but it is also a SLAPP—strategic lawsuits against public participation. It is a type of litigation, or threat of litigation, that is used, as the name suggests, strategically by claimants against organisations and individuals, including NGOs, activists, academics, whistleblowers and journalists, to shut down free speech. We are not going to settle the

appropriate mechanisms here and now, but as we cannot give into Putin, we cannot give into the bully boy tactics of oligarchs or anyone else who wants to abuse their power and wealth.

Perhaps the Government can give some thought to protecting investigative journalists, as raised by the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), who have the courage to take on people, and to ensuring that agencies of the state are properly equipped and protected and have the capability and capacity to take on such people through unexplained wealth orders and other measures. We could all do with rereading the Treasury Committee’s report on economic crime. Certainly, the single enforcement body that it alludes to would go some way to providing the real teeth that are clearly necessary but sadly absent.

Bob Seely: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In my speech, I was going to name another Member of the House of Lords—I will not do so—who has recently taken leave of the House of Lords to work for Russian interests but does not want to declare what he is doing. Because that person has taken leave, could one mention them in a speech—or despite them taking leave, is one still not allowed to mention them?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. My immediate answer, but I stand to be corrected if I am wrong, is that someone who has taken leave is still a Member of Parliament—a Member of the House of Lords—and must be treated as such in a debate here and not criticised directly by name. There are good reasons why we do things in this way. That is my answer to the hon. Gentleman.

3.11 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I start by declaring an interest as I lived and worked in Russia from 2005 to 2008 as director of the British Council in St Petersburg. I have great respect and affection for the Russian people. The tragedy, of course, is that for centuries, with the exception of a brief period of democracy in the 1990s, Russia has been led by a succession of kleptocratic thugs who have plundered the country’s vast natural resources and ruled with total disregard for the freedoms, rights, talents and potential of the Russian people.

Vladimir Putin is a product of that system. He is rotten to the core. He is the embodiment of the mafia state that Russia has become. He is not a grand master of the game of geopolitical chess; he is a gangster. He has sent his army into eastern Ukraine not because he is worried about NATO, but because he is frightened of democracy and terrified of freedom. He has seen the recent popular uprisings in Belarus and Kazakhstan, and he has seen the support that is building around opposition figures such as Alexei Navalny. He knows that in Russia, when revolution comes, it is swift and decisive.

Let us be clear: the invasion of Ukraine has absolutely nothing to do with NATO or some grand geopolitical strategy. Putin has sent his troops across the border because a thriving, prosperous and democratic Ukraine spells disaster for him and his cronies, so they will do their utmost to destroy the hopes and aspirations of the Ukrainian people.

Tragically, the international community has allowed Mr Putin to get away with it for far too long, and I am afraid that the sanctions that were announced by the Prime Minister yesterday show that we are still failing to respond with the strength that is required. Just five banks and three individuals were sanctioned, but none of the Russian banks that are of any real significance were included—for example, VTB, VEB, Alfa-Bank or Sberbank. The named individuals are also relatively minor players. Where is Abramovich? Where are Kostin and Usmanov? They should all be on the list. It was a slap on the wrist when far more hard-hitting measures were needed.

If we are to truly act with the robust moral authority that is required, we must get our own house in order. London has become the destination of choice for the crooks and thieves who run Russia. The cancelling of the tier 1 visa scheme over the weekend was a welcome move, but the Home Secretary's refusal to publish the long-completed report on the scheme is deeply troubling, as it is bound to give rise to the suspicion that the Government have something to hide. Currently, 700 Russian millionaires live in the UK on the basis of tier 1 visas. What financial due diligence was done on their applications? Have the national security implications of their presence in our country been properly assessed? Have they had access to the Prime Minister or other senior members of the Government?

On the matter of Russians buying political influence, the Home Secretary must surely now review all the donations that have been made to the Conservative party by dual British-Russian citizens with connections to the Russian state, and she must update the House on that as a matter of urgency. The House also needs to know why only four individuals have been the subject of unexplained wealth orders since those measures were introduced in 2017.

The Opposition have repeatedly warned the Government about the links between the City of London and the corridors of power in the Kremlin, but in recent years the Conservative party has received almost £4 million in donations from individuals with close links to the Russian Government, which has clearly created a conflict of interest that has prevented any meaningful action. Enough is enough. Our national security and our reputation as a country that believes in and upholds the rule of law are at stake. We need a root-and-branch overhaul of the broken system; we need an economic crime Bill; we need a registration of overseas entities Bill; we need a total overhaul of Companies House, so that it is empowered to be a guardian of propriety rather than a passive library; and we need the full implementation of the Russia report.

Ukraine is being attacked by a rogue state that is intent on destroying democracy, liberty and the rule of law—a state led by a thug who orders mafia-style hits on the streets of our country. We must stand firm against Mr Putin and his cronies, and we will, but the Government must also take stronger action, and they must do so now.

3.16 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I think I have been here before. We have discussed the role of unincorporated associations in providing a loophole for political campaign finance in the UK, particularly

for the Conservative party, and notably, the role of the Constitutional Research Council, which seeks to promote the Union in all its parts. We are all mindful of the £435,000 that it donated to the DUP during the Brexit campaign.

Although I knew we were sure to hear a fairly good overview of the myriad examples of Tories having their mouths full of Russian gold this afternoon, along with the excellent article by John Kampfner in this morning's edition of *The Times*, I realised that it might be worth considering a longer view of the modern history of illicit finance in this political state. I support the official Opposition's motion but I will give a broader historical narrative as to why we are where we are.

The excellent work done by Peter Geoghegan at openDemocracy on campaign finance and by David Leask in *The Herald*, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), on the abuse of Scottish limited partnerships deserves greater scrutiny. I also refer hon. Members to my Westminster Hall debate in February 2019 on the saga of unincorporated associations. The whole morass of state capture by financial interests, often from overseas, was not inevitable and could have been avoided.

Oliver Bullough, who has done so much to document the nexus of Russian illicit finance and political influence, has written quite a few times about the advent of the Eurodollar age, as the Soviet Union found a rather deflated 1960s City of London a willing recipient of its foreign exchange reserves and the modern practice of offshore financing was born. That was just the start, however, of the competitive advantage that the City enjoyed when the sluice gates were opened.

It was to the great detriment of the good people of Russia that at the very moment they were experiencing economic shock therapy and the systemic looting of their country's great wealth, those looking for convenient places to stash the loot were welcomed—I have to say; it is a historical reality—by a new Labour Government desperate to show that they could be trusted to do right by the City. That is well documented. I will just dip into the economist Brett Christophers' superb book "*Rentier Capitalism*":

"It was New Labour that in the late 1990s shrunk the City's regulatory system into the minimalist form of the Financial Services Authority...the FSA's architects and administrators were themselves entirely up-front about just how hands-off and permissive this pared-down new regulator would be."

The alarm bells were already ringing for those who could see what was happening in Russia after 1999. I have spoken about John Kampfner's article in *The Times* today, and I think we should be really mindful of some of the other things he has said in the past.

It is not as though the signs were not there for the wider public. In 2006, not only did Putin's increasingly murderous domestic agenda become clearer with the assassination of the journalist Anna Politkovskaya, but he began to demonstrate the contempt with which he saw the UK with the cruel and calculated murder of Alexander Litvinenko here in London. I am afraid that that began under the premiership of Tony Blair, and the phrase "Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime" seems to ring a wee bit hollow.

We all know very well what happened next, and we have had a pretty good run through the ways that the looted wealth of the Russian people—ordinary Russians

[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

who, as I mentioned earlier, should maybe have been given the golden visas to come here and enjoy the benefits of freedom and democracy—has entered the body politic not only in buying football clubs, art galleries and prestige property, but in keeping private schools and charitable foundations, as well as Members on both sides of the other Chamber, financially solvent.

The UK often likes to see itself as some sort of soft underbelly of superpower, but that soft power has never been as soft an underbelly as it is now, in that too many of our ruling class have been happy to have been rubbed. We are beginning to see the results of this almost three decades-long infatuation with illicit Russian finance, and I have to say that I cannot help but wonder if we are not correct in concluding that this very fabric of the British political state really could not help itself.

3.21 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (*Martin Docherty-Hughes*), and to take part in this debate. This debate is so important at this point in our history, and I think we are all disappointed that it has to take place.

As a child of the cold war, I remember the feeling of relief in the 1990s that the constant threat and fear of a war in Europe had been lifted, yet here we are. As a student of international relations, I studied the Cuban missile crisis, but it is only in the past few weeks that I have fully appreciated what it is like to watch and wait, and to hope that, like Khrushchev, Putin would blink first and the crisis would be averted. We all know now that that is not what is going to happen and is not what has happened.

There has been the so-called incursion—the invasion—of east Ukraine, and the threat of sanctions as presented by the Government was not enough to prevent it. They did not propose sufficient financial pain for Putin and his allies to give any of them pause for thought. It was not enough to protect the people of Ukraine. The people of Kyiv—it is twinned with my own city of Edinburgh, and we have shared exchanges and had receptions with them—may now face the most horrific of ordeals, and that strengthens my resolve. I am so disappointed that the action proposed by this Government was not strong enough to deter it.

The Liberal Democrats welcome tough sanctions on Russia, and we wish to preserve the unity that will be so important in controlling this evil—not just unity in this House, but unity with our NATO allies. However, I fear we need something stronger and more far-reaching if Putin is to take our resolve seriously—something much stronger than we have at the moment. The current list of those who will face sanctions is weak, with only three individuals on it, and it allows many of Putin's cronies simply to get away scot-free. It is time that we used the full force of the sanction powers at our disposal, and Putin's Russia must be treated like the rogue state it is.

The Government have dithered and delayed on the draft registration of overseas entities Bill for more than 2,000 days now. It went through pre-legislative scrutiny in 2018, and we are told by a Minister in the Lords that it is sat on a shelf gathering dust. The Lib Dems, on the

other hand, have been doing the Government's work for them. My hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (*Layla Moran*) has introduced the Registration of Overseas Entities Bill, using the text of the Government's draft Bill, and it has support from all parties of the House. Why are we not accelerating its passage through the House? We would be prepared to sit night and day to get it passed this week, and I am sure others would be too, in order to put a stop to Russian interference in the UK property market.

We have heard much today about the Russian money with which London is awash, as well as about the kleptocracy. We have heard about the golden visas, which have now ended, but the Government dithered and delayed, while not prepared to offer visas to the foreign nationals working at the forefront of the pandemic. We need the long and overdue report on those golden visas and who is in receipt of them.

We will not persuade Putin of our resolve if we do not send a stronger message immediately. If we are saying that we will get more sanctions after further action, that is not enough. Measures such as moving the champions league away from St Petersburg are essential, but they are not enough.

We must be both united and strong in our stance against the outrage perpetrated on the people of Ukraine. We must be united on their behalf, and we must make sure that Putin is deterred, is deterred now and does not ignore the next warning. We must keep adding layers of warning before he has invaded Ukraine—all of Ukraine—and destroyed its democracy, denied its people their freedom and begun to look elsewhere.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I now have to reduce the time limit to four minutes.

3.26 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): It goes without saying that the response from the Government yesterday was totally inadequate. We have had a great deal of warning over a very long period of Putin's intention and the likelihood of what happened yesterday taking place, so it really does prompt the question why we were not better prepared with stronger sanctions from the outset when he seized control of yet further parts of Ukraine.

We have been waiting for a considerable time for Government legislation. People have mentioned the economic crime Bill, reform of Companies House, the law to register foreign agents, the registration of overseas entities Bill and the replacement of the outdated Computer Misuse Act 1990, while the Government's Elections Bill will enable overseas donations to be given in our political system. We have also had—nearly two years ago—the Intelligence and Security Committee report on Russia, and all the time we have been waiting for the Government to act.

Even if we accept the fact that the £2.3 million of donations to the Conservative party that have taken place since the Prime Minister took over the leadership of that party are legitimate, the Conservatives have to acknowledge that accepting that sort of money—while sitting on this legislation and regulation, and with the delay in action and the delay in the response to the Intelligence and Security Committee report—at best looks dodgy.

We also have the photograph of the Foreign Secretary—a photograph she published herself—with Lubov Chernukhin, wife of the former Deputy Minister of Finance of Russia, who has given £1.7 million to the Conservative party. All that prompts a question about what the Government's motives are for delaying the legislation that we need to deal with the Russian dirty money that has been laundered through the City of London.

Our legal system is being distorted in favour of these aggressive criminals who are using SLAPP orders to silence journalists and newspapers, and to attack publishing companies that publish books about the affairs of those individuals. Eminent law firms such as Carter-Ruck and Schillings are allowing themselves to be used to corrupt our legal system in favour of those dangerous individuals. We should be calling those law firms out, because their activities are providing an opportunity for criminals who are laundering money through the City of London to operate. They are taking blood money from those people. They are using a plethora or a confetti of letters to individuals, to stop them being able to do their jobs, or to soak up their resources and prevent them from investigating those activities. They have even gone as far as taking the Serious Fraud Office to Court. The Eurasian Natural Resources Corporation has taken a Government agency that has a duty to investigate such activities, and tried to shut it up using its resources. It has even attacked individuals in the Serious Fraud Office. That must be stopped, and the Government need to act.

3.30 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): This debate has exposed the gulf between what is needed to deal with illicit finance—and, one could add, what the Government say they are doing or intend to do—and what they are actually doing, which is almost nothing, in terms of either introducing measures or enforcing the measures that already there. Whether oligarchs, the companies they set up to hide behind, or agents of hostile powers, they can operate freely.

We heard about sanctions from the shadow Foreign Secretary in his opening remarks, from my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) and from my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), so we know what has to be done—there is a list of things that have to be done. There is the Russia report, and there is the economic crime report—why will not the Government act on those? That is not partisan or party political, because we also heard what Lord Agnew said, which is that what is being done is “desperately inadequate”, particularly the failure to bring forward an economic crime Bill. We heard from Lord Faulks, a former Conservative Minister, who said that the Government are turning a “blind eye” to what is going on and have done nothing to stem the flow of illicit funds, and that he was misled regarding the introduction of a property register. For all the great furore that the Home Secretary made about tier 1 visas, everyone who wanted one has got one already. This is shutting the door after the horse has bolted, and there has been no enforcement related to it. Indeed, a new type of visa will be introduced, so presumably it will start all over again.

In the limited time I have, I want to address the failure of regulation, enforcement and prosecution. We have heard from other Members about the failure of the

courts, about Companies House, about trusts and unincorporated associations, and about how things are easily concealed. It gives me no pleasure to say this, but the Serious Fraud Office suffers from its budget being a fraction of what the company it is prosecuting has to spend on lawyers and defence. But it is also true that the head of the Serious Fraud Office is under investigation for the conduct of the Ziad Akle case. The accusation is that the SFO went after the minnows and let the sharks swim away, which is exactly what the Government are doing on sanctions. Many senior people in the SFO end up working for those very law firms we have heard about which are defending the oligarchs. What are the Government doing about that? It is a laughing stock in terms of criminal enforcement and prosecution in this country.

What are the Government doing about SLAPPS? We have heard about that issue several times, including in the excellent debate we had here last month, led by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill. They identified the way that oligarchs and companies can persecute and prosecute investigative journalism.

What will the Government, who love interfering with the courts, do in response to the *Bloomberg v. ZXC* case last week? That shows that when an investigative journalist publishes details of an individual before charge, the individual can, on the grounds of privacy, hide behind that ruling. Nothing is being done to support those who wish to expose what is wrong and everything is being done to protect that wrongdoing. The fact that there is Tory party money behind this stinks.

3.34 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I am honoured to be called in this important debate and agree with all the concerns of the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), about Russian aggression and the illicit finance sustaining the Putin regime that is responsible for the aggression. That aggression threatens not just the Ukrainian people—I met a Ukrainian constituent of mine this morning and share her deep concern and love of her country—but the wider region and regions across the world. For example, in Bosnia, and in Republika Srpska in particular, ongoing Russian interference is threatening peace. Putin's dirty money coming through London is a big part of that, and it is right that we have time to discuss it in this place and urge the Government to do so much more. President Roosevelt said that the key to diplomacy is to “speak softly and carry a big stick”,

but the Government are doing totally the opposite: they are talking tough and acting very soft.

In Putney, when we look around the big developments by the river, we see dark windows. We wonder who owns those houses, why they are they not living in them and why they are putting up prices for us in London. Of course, illicit money thrives on secrecy and darkness, and that is what we see here.

What would Labour do were we in government now? We would do so much more. First, the Elections Bill is being debated in the House of Lords tomorrow, so there is time to look again at Labour's new clause 2, which would have cut the connection between the increased number of overseas voters that we will have and the

[Fleur Anderson]

open door for donations that will be allowed to flood through with the increased allowance. Why do we not simply cut that connection? I hope that the Minister will address that. I urge him to bring new clause 2 back in the Lords tomorrow.

Labour would also implement all the recommendations of the Russia report. We would push for Russia to be excluded from financial mechanisms such as SWIFT and ban trading on Russian sovereign debt. We would tackle Putin's campaign of misinformation. We would work with our European allies to ensure that the Nord Stream 2 pipeline is cancelled. We would take steps to ensure a robust and transparent register of beneficial owners of overseas entities. We would urgently reform Companies House. We would bring in the economic crime Bill that has been promised for six years. We would fix unexplained wealth orders. We would also not leave the sanctions at just three oligarchs and five banks, which shows that we have one weak and out-of-touch Government. By contrast, the EU has announced sanctions for the 351 Duma members and, in the US, Biden has already announced sanctions on the country's sovereign debt. Our allies are going further than us. To say that we have to go in step with them is just an excuse; actually, we are not in step. I hope that the Minister will say something about that.

It is time to bring an end to the Tory party donations from Russian oligarchs that are linked to all this slow action by the Government—surely there is a link. If there is no such link, the Government should do far more, show us that and put the security of the Ukrainian people and the British people before those who pollute our financial system and wish us harm.

3.38 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I commend the Labour party on the motion. It is an important consideration and it is right that, as well as supporting Ukraine and condemning Russian aggression, we should look deeper into how the Kremlin finances itself as well as our own resilience against bad actors and dirty money. It is not a pretty picture. It is frustrating because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) said, the SNP has been calling for action on it for years, and although we do not have the legal powers in Holyrood to act ourselves for Scotland, the UK Government do have the power but do not have the desire to act and have done far too little, far too late.

I listened carefully to the Minister's response to the shadow Foreign Secretary's speech. I have much respect for her and wish her a long and happy career at the Dispatch Box, but she must be reassured to know that she has a great future in stand-up comedy if it all goes wrong. It is flatly not credible to say that the UK Government have treated this as a priority. Actions do count. Actions do matter. We can judge the Government by their record on this issue and it is a pretty poor one. The numbers are stark: at least 2,189 companies involved in laundering £82 billion of Russian dirty cash. Transparency International calculates that Russians accused of corruption or links to the Kremlin own about at least £1.5 billion-worth of property in the UK. Billions more is owned by opaque offshore trusts. We do not know who owns them.

The sanctions announced yesterday are wholly insufficient to deter future aggression or punish malfeasance in the past. We want more, but I would make a wider point: it is probably worth cracking down on dirty cash anyway and making sure that we are resilient to bad actors in the future. The fact that we have vast tracts of Scotland owned by opaque trusts, and we do not actually know who owns them, is a scandal and it is well past time we deal with it.

I hope the Government recognise the opportunity they have. I take Labour Members at face value that there is an opportunity for the Government here. There is a consensus in the House to act and a real willingness to see progress. We do need an economic crime Act. We do need an overseas entities Act. We do need a register of beneficial ownership. We do need reform of and investment in Companies House. We also need to see the full implementation of the Russia report and the "Moscow's Gold" report. All those things will strengthen our democracy, strengthen our financial integrity, strengthen our resilience against bad actors, and strengthen the faith of the people of these islands in democracy on these islands. All those things are worth doing. There is a need to act. There is a consensus for action. There is no excuse for delay.

It is a matter of fact that the Conservative party has received £2.3 million of Russian-linked donations since the Prime Minister was elected. Continued delay on this range of issues will only fuel suspicion that that delay is for the very worst reasons. I hope those on the Treasury Bench recognise the opportunity they have on this issue.

3.42 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): In our armoury of responses to countering Russian aggression, tackling illicit finance should be one of our most powerful weapons. We all recognise that Putin's actions on Monday were a gross violation of international law and showed complete disregard for the sovereignty of Ukraine, but the sanctions announced yesterday were widely recognised as more feeble than the Prime Minister's tennis backhand. The scale of the proliferation of illicit finance, particularly in London, has allowed Putin and his cronies to spread their dark money through the west, and with it a dark web of influence. As it trickles down through the system, it impacts upon our politics, our economy, our housing market and our public finances.

Under the leadership of the current Prime Minister, the Conservative party has accepted £2.3 million from donors of Russia-linked money in recent years. It also accepted £160,000 from a Russian donor for one tennis match—we could call that the ultimate backhander. The Pandora papers revealed that Mohamed Amersi, a major Conservative party donor who funded the Prime Minister's campaign to become Conservative leader, advised on a deal that was later found to be a £220 million bribe for the daughter of the then President of Uzbekistan. Like many of my colleagues, I want to see any money with links back to Putin's regime returned. Shedding our politics from the influence of dubious cash is in the interests of us all and our democracy, and bolsters our firm stance against Russia.

As we have heard, London is the "laundromat" for corrupt money. Those are not my words, but the words of the Russia report, published in July 2020. Half of the

estate agents advertising properties for sale in London at £5 million failed to register with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs for anti-money-laundering supervision in 2019, or had failed to pay their annual fees for that. A Treasury report published in December confirmed that luxury London homes are an

“attractive method to launder illicit funds”.

We all know that the housing market is broken, but part of the reason for that is the impact of illicit money flushing through the market and pushing up house prices for all our constituents in all parts of the land.

Perhaps worst of all is the illicit finance that is costing the British taxpayer dearly. The National Crime Agency estimates that money laundering costs the British economy £100 million—almost five times what we spend on social care. Recognising the toxic effect of illicit finance, it is time to act. If not now, when?

Six years since the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, promised to introduce a register of beneficial owners of overseas entities, we are still waiting. In Prime Minister's questions today, the Prime Minister confirmed that an economic crime Bill will not be introduced in this parliamentary Session. We do not have time for dither and delay. We need to know who the real beneficiaries of shell companies are to end the attractive secrecy of the UK market for fraudulent cash. In that vein, Companies House is no longer fit for purpose and is not doing the job that we need it to. The Treasury Committee agreed that reform of Companies House has been too slow and is “essential” to end the scourge of illicit money.

Finally, let me turn to the question of why the Government have failed to use unexplained wealth orders, which are an effective method to prevent or deal with illicit finance. In theory, they provide an opportunity to confiscate assets without ever having to prove that the property was obtained from criminal activity, but only nine orders have been issued relating to four cases, as of February 2022. As the Russia report stated, it is far too easy for businesses that have been investing their dirty money in the UK for many years to find lawyers and accountants to somehow explain their wealth. We need to ensure that the Government have effective tools at their disposal that are fit for purpose and challenge those who enable illicit finance as well as benefit from it.

3.46 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I thank all the right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to this debate. Many points have been made over the past few hours, but two in particular stand out. First, there was a consensus across all parts of the House—with the exception of one Member who spoke—that the Government have not gone anywhere near far enough with the package of sanctions that was announced yesterday. Secondly, there is an enormous gulf between the rhetoric employed by Ministers and the lack of action that we have seen on illicit finance over many years.

Let me reiterate the Opposition's position on these issues. We support the Government in taking a firm stand against Russian aggression and in favour of Ukraine's freedom to decide its future. We support solidarity with our NATO allies. We reject the imperialist notion of “spheres of influence” by which Russia seeks to limit the choices and freedoms of its neighbours.

There can, of course, always be a nationalist appeal to people who speak the same language living across different borders, but if we follow that route, we will be in a never-ending cycle of ethnically based conflicts. No one has pointed out the dangers of that road more eloquently this week than Martin Kimani, the Kenyan ambassador to the UN Security Council, who urged the world to leave behind the mindset of dead empires. His warning not to take refuge in nostalgia and grievance but to look to the future was a leadership lesson for our times. What a contrast between that powerful eloquence and the recent essay on Ukraine by President Putin. Anyone reading that will have seen declarations of love and common history laced with threats and denial of freedom on every single page, and the desperate, needy pleas for respect.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank the right hon. Member, my friend, for allowing me to intervene. The real worry is that Putin's forces have now gone into the area where his proxy forces have operated: Luhansk and Donetsk. Two thirds of those provinces are still in Ukraine, yet the Duma has said that they are now Russian, so at any moment, we can expect Russian troops to go across those demarcation lines. We therefore have to be extremely strong in response and our sanctions have to be much harder.

Mr McFadden: I respect the right hon. Member's experience and agree absolutely with his intervention. Let us call things what they are: not breakaway republics, but step-by-step annexation; not peacekeepers, but an invading force. We have seen the pattern over and over again.

The former High Representative of the European Union, Baroness Ashton, has spoken about President Putin's strategy of the wedge. He seizes part of the territory of a neighbouring country—Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, or parts of the Donbas in Ukraine. By holding the wedge, he seeks to limit the freedom of those countries to join international associations. He seeks to absorb the rest of the country in managing the conflict that he has created. He uses up resources, he creates a refugee problem and, if he cannot take over neighbouring countries entirely, he at least ensures that they are not free to develop as they wish because they are not whole and their freedom is compromised.

That “Greater Russia” mindset has been behind President Putin's policy towards Ukraine for the past eight years. Right now, it is not fully clear whether he will be content just to hold the wedge or whether he will go further, but even what he has done so far is already limiting Ukraine's options and choices for the future.

How should we respond? Some lessons have been learned. The solidarity shown by the United States, the United Kingdom and most European countries in recent weeks has been important and impressive. Calling out the troop build-up and the creation of flashpoint incidents and false flag pretexts has shone a welcome light on what is happening. The development of open source intelligence has exposed the ham-fisted propaganda emerging from Russia and its troll factories.

Allied unity is important, but so too is allied resolve. In the past, we have set red lines, but when they were breached we have drawn back. The result in Syria was the repeated use of chemical weapons and the ability for Russia to dictate the course of events for years afterwards.

[Mr McFadden]

This time, if we talk about maximum sanctions for military action, we have to be prepared to carry them out. Who really believes that sanctioning just three people who have already been on the US list for years will deter President Putin from acting further? No wonder the Royal United Services Institute, the respected defence and foreign policy think-tank, described yesterday's actions as like having

"turned up to a gunfight with a peashooter."

The Government's actions have to match their rhetoric. Yesterday, that simply was not the case. The Minister's defence is that this is simply the first tranche and that there is more to come, but what is the case for waiting, given what we have seen? Is there anything in President Putin's actions in recent days to suggest that he is in compromise mode? He is not. He is testing us every hour.

Not only do we need a sanctions regime that matches the seriousness of what has been done, but we need determined action to clean up what the Intelligence and Security Committee has called the London laundromat.

Mr Baron: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr McFadden: I will press on, because we are short of time.

Our country and our capital city should not be a welcome home for illicit finance, the proceeds of looting and the proceeds of kleptocracy. There is a basic problem: if sanctions are to work, we have to know what people own. The Government have been sitting on a registration of overseas entities Bill for four years, and it has been six years since it was first talked about. How can sanctions be effective if we do not have legislation to show us what people own? Queen's Speech after Queen's Speech has passed without action. Only a few weeks ago, the Government's own counter-fraud Minister resigned, saying that that legislation was once again to be set aside. Today, it looks as if it may be delayed further. It must be brought forward as soon as possible.

At the heart of money laundering is the use of shell companies to hide the true nature of ownership behind layer after layer of needless complexity. That lack of transparency is the fraudster's friend. Reform of Companies House is long overdue, but, again, pledges to reform it have not been matched by action. If we are serious about policing kleptocracy and fraud, we have to change this situation and empower our register of companies to be a regulator, not just a library of information—and sometimes a library of dodgy information at that. The recommendations of the Intelligence and Security Committee's report on Russia have to be implemented. Our agencies have to be resourced to use the powers that they have, otherwise the legislation that we pass in this place is just bits of paper. We also have to be alive to the network of enablers who act as the praetorian guard for the oligarchs here in the UK.

As has already been said, it is not only money that is laundered here, but also reputations. The donation to a university, the purchase of a football club, the sponsoring of a gallery, donations to the Conservative party—all that is designed to burnish the reputations of those involved. In the whole history of this, one fact stands out: the interests of finance have trumped those of

security. Then, when people call this out, there is the punitive legal action designed to shut people up and designed to stop the brave investigative journalists whom we should be thanking for the work they have done in exposing what is happening.

The Prime Minister's defence yesterday was to accuse those of us who question many of these actions of Russophobia, and indeed the Minister repeated that today in her opening remarks. Does she, and does he, really think that the CVs of those involved in this are those of ordinary Russians? Russia is a country where the vast majority of the wealth is owned by about 500 people. We should not confuse those who live off Russia's wealth with the sweat and toil of the Russian people who created the wealth in the first place. That is no defence for the funding of the Conservative party, and it is no defence for the actions of oligarchs. How does the Prime Minister think they made their wealth in the first place? They did it with the support and backing of the Russian regime. It is the wealth of the Russian people that is being laundered, not the proceeds of exceptional talent or enterprise or creativity or ingenuity.

We stand at a dangerous moment, one that requires not only unity between allies but resolve, for weakness here will be noticed by those elsewhere in the world who are looking for territorial gains. This is not just a matter of finance; it is a matter of national security, and that means the maximum package of actions. It means sticking to the red lines that we have set. That is what we urge the Government to do, and it is action that today's Labour party will support.

3.57 pm

The Minister for Security and Borders (Damian Hinds):

I welcome this important debate. I thank the Opposition for securing it, and I am grateful for the manner in which the shadow Foreign Secretary opened it, the manner in which the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury closed it, and the tone in which it has largely, if not quite completely, been conducted.

Of course Government must be scrutinised and must be held to account. In our oppositional parliamentary liberal democracy, that is what we do, and I think it is what this House does rather well. But is also a great strength of this House that we can come together to show the unity of our ultimate purpose—the defence of freedom and democracy at home and abroad—and I believe that, collectively, we have done that today.

In his statement yesterday, the Prime Minister was clear. In recognising the supposed independence of the so-called people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine, President Putin has flagrantly violated international law. Ukraine is a sovereign country, and has a right to choose its own security arrangements. It is clear that the deployment of Russian forces in sovereign Ukrainian territory amounts to a renewed invasion of the country. The Prime Minister referred yesterday to "our valiant Ukrainian friends", and added:

"We will keep faith with them in the critical days that lie ahead, and whatever happens, Britain will not waver in our resolve."—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2022; Vol. 709, c. 175.]

The United Kingdom also has an absolute commitment to defend our NATO allies. We have already doubled the size of our deployment in Estonia, where the British Army leads the NATO battlegroup.

Yesterday the UK, in co-ordination with international partners, announced a first wave of targeted sanctions. I say a first wave, but in fact more than 270 individuals are already sanctioned under previous programmes. Yesterday's measures placed banks worth £37 billion under sanctions, in addition to more oligarchs, and there is more to come. My hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) rightly mentioned the importance of calibration. It is also vital that after this first barrage we continue to work in lockstep with our friends and allies around the world, as my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) rightly pointed out. These measures will hit more oligarchs and banks close to the Kremlin, sending a clear message that the UK will use our economic heft to inflict pain on the Putin regime and degrade its strategic interests.

The UK will also sanction those members of the Duma and the Federation Council who voted to recognise the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk, violating Ukraine's territory. We will extend the territorial sanctions imposed on Crimea to non-Government controlled territory in the so-called breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, and we are ready to go much further if Russia does not pull back from the brink. In the event of further aggressive acts against Ukraine from Russia, we have an unprecedented package of further sanctions ready to go. I will not, from the Dispatch Box, go into future designations or who we will target and with what measure, but Moscow should be clear that we will use these powers to maximum effect if Russia further invades Ukraine.

Corruption and illicit finance are the lifeblood of the kleptocratic Russian Government, and individuals associated with the Russian state can try to further their influence through investment. This Government are strongly committed to tackling—and we continue to act against—the threat from illicit finance. Through the economic crime plan launched in 2019, we are overhauling our suspicious activity reports framework against money laundering, including from Russia. We are increasing the number of financial investigators in the National Crime Agency, and we are substantially increasing funding for our economic crime response, with an additional £400 million over the next three years, funded in part by a new economic crime levy.

Liam Byrne: I want to clarify one point. The Minister seemed to imply that further sanctions would be contingent on a further roll-forward of Russian troops, but that is not what the Minister for Europe and North America, the right hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) said to the House yesterday. He said that there would be further sanctions regardless of whether there was any further advance. Can the Minister clarify that point?

Damian Hinds: We will work together in lockstep with our friends and allies around the world. I will not go into detail now about what future designations might be or the precise nature of them, but as I said earlier, Moscow should know that we will use these measures to their full effect.

Stewart Hosie: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: Unfortunately we are overrunning, and I will not get through responding to the points made in the debate if I take a lot of interventions. I can

do either, but I think it is important that I respond to the points made in the debate.

Specifically in relation to Russian illicit finance, the National Crime Agency has increased the number of investigations into corrupt elites. Some of that response will be visible through law enforcement, policy and international engagement. Other options are less visible but that does not mean they are not impactful. We are going further. It is vital in the fight against dirty money that we increase transparency in order to know who ultimately controls and owns a company or property, and the Prime Minister is committed to bringing forward new legislation to include reforms to Companies House and to limited partnerships, and to introducing the register of overseas entities beneficial ownership Bill.

Last week the Home Secretary announced the closure of the tier 1 investor visa scheme—

Dame Angela Eagle *rose*—

Damian Hinds: Just a moment.

We want innovators to invest in Britain, and the replacement visa programme will be about creating a positive economic impact, not just volume of cash. I was about to come on to responding to the points that the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) made about the Intelligence and Security Committee report, but I will wait to hear what she has to say now.

Dame Angela Eagle: I appreciate that. Given that a register of overseas beneficiaries has been promised since 2015, will the Minister say when we are going to get it? All we get is Prime Ministers telling us that it is coming, but it never arrives.

Damian Hinds: I am not making an announcement today on the programme of debates and legislation in this House. We are committed to these measures, and I will say a little more about them.

The hon. Lady and others spoke about the ISC report. Since the Salisbury attack, we have made real progress in disrupting malign influence in the UK. At that time, as hon. Members will recall, 23 Russian intelligence officers in diplomatic roles were expelled from this country. The Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019 strengthened the powers of our police to stop, question, detain and search individuals travelling through UK ports to determine whether they are involved in hostile-state activity, and we have strengthened our scrutiny of inward investment through the National Security and Investment Act 2021.

We are looking to bring forward legislation to strengthen our powers to counter threats from foreign states and to update our counter-espionage laws. This will provide the security services and law enforcement agencies with the tools they need to tackle the wide range of future threats and evolving tactics of other states.

My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) brings particular expertise to this debate, and he spoke about the range of ways in which other states may seek to harm us. I reassure him of our intent to bring forward legislation on precisely that range of state threats.

My hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay spoke about the wider forces of history, the need to defend and nurture democracy and the twin role of defence and soft power, and I absolutely agree. I reassure

[Damian Hinds]

the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who speaks for the Scottish National party, that the Government remain committed to reforming limited partnership law and recognise the important role of limited partnerships.

My hon. Friend the Member for Devizes spoke of the financial system's critical role and the possible leverage effect. I reassure him that nothing is off the table. The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) asked about the report on tier 1 visas issued between 2008 and 2015, and I confirm that we will publish that report. The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) asked, among other things, about the economic crime plan. Thirty-four of 52 actions are now complete, with good progress having been made on the remaining 18.

We take illicit finance very seriously. The UK is an open economy, it is an attractive place to live and it has one of the world's leading financial centres. That combination attracts many legitimate investors, but I do not underestimate the extent of the illegitimate, nor do I understate the imperative to clamp down on it.

We have the global human rights sanctions and the anti-corruption sanctions. Building on the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, the Criminal Finances Act 2017 brought in account freezing and unexplained wealth orders. We reformed and have now ended tier 1 visas. We created the National Economic Crime Centre and set out the economic crime plan, and we are going further by increasing investment in law enforcement, reforming anti-money laundering alerts and embarking on a major reform of Companies House.

We already have a register of beneficial ownership and will introduce a register specific to real estate, and we will further strengthen unexplained wealth orders. Those key economic crime measures are an urgent priority for this Government, as we recognise the collective threat that serious criminals, kleptocrats and corrupt elites present to our financial system and national security. Dirty money and kleptocracy are at the heart of the Putin regime, and they are not welcome. This Government will use all the powers at our disposal against individuals and entities that seek to harm our democracy and our people.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House expresses solidarity with the people of Ukraine, and supports their sovereignty and Ukraine's territorial integrity; condemns Russian aggression and emphasises the UK's commitment to NATO; resolves to end illicit finance that rewards and sustains the Putin regime in Russia; calls on the Government to introduce an Economic Crime Bill, an Overseas Entities Bill and a register of beneficial ownership by the end of March 2022; and further calls on the Foreign Secretary to make a statement to this House on the implementation of the recommendations of the Intelligence and Security Committee's Russia Report, HC 632, published on 21 July 2020.

Non-commissioned Exempt Accommodation

4.9 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes the significant increase in the numbers of people housed in non-commissioned exempt accommodation under successive Conservative Governments; regrets the opportunities that this increase has provided for unscrupulous operators to exploit vulnerable individuals for financial gain at the taxpayers' expense; recognises that a range of factors have driven the marked growth of this sector including a chronic shortage of genuinely affordable housing, reductions in funding for housing-related support, new barriers to access for single adults requiring social rented housing or mainstream privately rented housing, and a weakening of regulation and oversight; further regrets the detrimental impact that the growth of poor quality non-commissioned exempt accommodation is having on the health and well-being of those vulnerable individuals placed in it and on the public purse; and calls on the Government to introduce a package of emergency measures designed to secure immediate improvements in the quality of non-commissioned exempt accommodation and associated support, to ensure claims for exempt Housing Benefit consistently provide value for money and to drive unscrupulous operators out of the sector.

We move from the global to the very, very local. There is a scandal quietly unfolding in communities across this country, and today we set out our determination that the Government will finally take this seriously and act to put it right. Across Britain, from Blackpool to Birmingham, houses are being bought or rented supposedly to house vulnerable people in accommodation with extra care and help. Instead, these shameless profiteers are leaving vulnerable people languishing in disgusting, unsafe housing, and people who badly need our help are denied it. The taxpayer is paying for all of this and it is blighting entire neighbourhoods.

It was right to ensure that those who genuinely provide or need supported housing could access enhanced housing benefit, because the cost of housing vulnerable people who need care and support is undeniably higher. Before I came to this place, I worked for Centrepoin, whose work with care leavers, and young people with mental health problems and addiction issues is second to none. It takes time, care and commitment to help those young people build the lives they deserve. But it is utterly wrong that we have allowed this system to be abused and used by people who are destroying entire communities.

Very many good organisations do provide proper support through supported exempt accommodation, and they are as appalled as we are at this scandal—it cannot continue. Colleagues on the Opposition Benches have raised this issue time and again with Ministers. How can it possibly be that nearly 18 months after the Government recognised the problem and commissioned pilots to consider how to solve it, this is still going on? Over the past few years, this problem has skyrocketed. More than 150,000 households in this country are living in exempt accommodation—that is a 62% increase in five years. Not all of them are bad placements—some of them are a lifeline—but it is crystal clear that there is an growing scandal of rogue operators, who know how to cheat the system, and are making life a misery for the people they are supposed to care for and the people who live in these proud communities. They deserve so much better and we are determined that they are going to get it.

I would like to thank colleagues from across this House, and particularly Members from Birmingham and Bristol, who have long recognised the growing scandal and campaigned hard to make it right. They are here today and I am sure that they will have plenty to say to the Minister about it. Many of our local councils, too, are doing great work to address the problem head-on. For example, Birmingham City Council has introduced greater scrutiny of new exempt benefit claims and encourages all providers to sign up to a set of quality standards for exempt accommodation. It has joined a partnership of voluntary and statutory agencies to produce a charter of rights for residents of supported exempt accommodation. But such efforts are thwarted by weak laws and a Government that will not grant them the powers to take action.

This Government have not even given us the information that we deserve. It took a Freedom of Information Act request from the charity Crisis to tell us how many tenancies there are—we do not know where they are. There has been no announcement about the pilots for several months. We have not even been told whether they have ended, what they have concluded or the timetable for when action is going to be taken. But we do know this: the law is too weak. It says a provider must deliver care, support and supervision that is, in legal terms, “more than minimal”. But “more than minimal” has no firm definition, test or criteria. It could mean having a manager who visits the property once in a blue moon or installing a CCTV system. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) told the Minister in a recent Westminster Hall debate, in one shocking incident a key worker visited a property where the tenant had just been murdered, mistook the murderer for the victim and told her mother she was fine—she was dead.

We will hear many terrible stories today from colleagues in this House that show that this “more than minimal” definition is allowing these disgraceful firms and individuals to milk the taxpayer at the expense of some of the most vulnerable people in our country; they are destroying neighbourhoods and we are determined that the stories of those people affected will be heard in the highest levels of Government today.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): What do the local authorities or governments say when a specific case is reported of totally unsatisfactory accommodation in the way the hon. Lady alleges?

Lisa Nandy: They say, “Give us the powers to act. Give us the powers and the laws that we need and we will take action.” The people who lead authorities throughout the country have skin in the game: they live in these communities. These are not just the people they are elected to represent; they are friends, family and neighbours, as well as constituents. The people who lead authorities care deeply about taking action but simply do not have the power to do so.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Analysis carried out by the homelessness charity St Mungo’s estimates that between 2009 and 2018 funding for single homeless people fell by a shocking £1 billion—a cut of more than 50%. Does my hon. Friend agree that 10 years of devastating Conservative cuts are the cause of the growth in exempt accommodation and that the Government

must now properly fund local authorities so that they can provide the homeless accommodation and build the council homes that we need?

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, particularly on the latter point about building social housing. She is right, too, to say that it is a symptom of a housing market that is fundamentally broken. The warning light is flashing on the dashboard, but for too long we simply have not recognised it. It was precisely in the city of my hon. Friend, a superb MP for Coventry, that the Prime Minister launched his levelling-up agenda and created the levelling-up Department, promising to wrap his arms around people and communities and to help them to level up. What we are talking about is precisely the opposite.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The issue raised by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) is not right, because once a person comes to an area and offers themselves as a person in need of services, the council has obligations under legislation to provide services. It is not local authorities but the Government who have not sorted this issue out.

Lisa Nandy: I thank my hon. Friend for his work to draw attention to this appalling scandal.

As the Minister knows, it is not unusual to find properties in complete disrepair that would not be considered fit for human habitation in any way. It is not unusual for vulnerable women to be housed in properties with dangerous men and for them to be at risk of attack or to have been attacked.

Many years ago, I was prompted to enter elected politics as a councillor in the London Borough of Hammersmith, where I then lived, by the story of a 16-year-old girl in bed and breakfast accommodation at the height of the housing crisis at the time. She told me she had been raped by the owner of the property and nothing had been done—she was still in that accommodation. I went to see Hammersmith Council, which was superb and acted to close the facility down, but it had the powers to do so. I thought we had left those sorts of days behind. When I heard from my hon. Friends the stories about what is happening in their communities and how many times they have raised issues to no avail, I simply could not believe that in 2022 we stand here and allow this to continue.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): With one particular problematic property in Bristol, we found we could get only so far with the Charity Commission, because we had questions about the management structure; we could get a little way in trying to enforce planning permission, because too many people were living there; and adjustments kept being made to housing benefit—if we said that they were not offering more than minimal support, they would add a little bit of support. It was so frustrating and we were going round and round the houses. We need a set of regulations that we can go in and enforce straight away.

Lisa Nandy: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her work on this issue. It was clear from the recent Westminster Hall debate led by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) that there was a particular problem in Birmingham, but my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy)

[Lisa Nandy]

did a sterling job in that debate of reminding us that this is a problem not just in Birmingham but in Bristol and right throughout the country. All the Members who contributed to that debate spoke with one voice: we know what the problem is and what needs to be done; all we are lacking is a Government who will get behind what needs to be done and make sure that it happens.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): The hon. Lady says that she entered local government to deal with this issue. She entered local government in 2006, following a housing crisis after eight years of Labour Government. Does she not agree with me that the real, fundamental issue, under parties of all shades for too many years, is the lack of homes being built? There has been a massive increase in the past few years, but is that not something we need to do more fundamentally for the entire housing sector?

Lisa Nandy: Let me just say that I really regret this partisan tone. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that I entered local politics in 2006 having worked not just with children in care and young homeless teenagers at Centrepoin, but with child refugees, campaigning against practices such as those at Yarl's Wood immigration detention centre that had happened under a Conservative Government but were also happening under a Labour Government. I will fight injustice wherever I find it and whoever is responsible for it, and I will stand up for people who do not have a voice. That is the great gift and privilege of this place. We are handed a megaphone through which we can shout loudly and make things change for some of the most vulnerable people in this country, and that is what we should do. I gently remind him, too, that the record under this Government has been appalling. Social housing builds have fallen off a cliff and housing-related support has been stripped away. Talk to any of the organisations, including Centrepoin, which I was proud to work for, and they will tell you that that situation is causing enormous harm not just to the people affected, but to many of the people who live in those communities, and it has to change.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I do not mind being partisan on this issue. Although the Labour Government, between 1997 and 2010, should have built more social housing, the absolute brutal fact of the matter is that the number of social lettings available for tenants has fallen from just under 400,000 to 300,000 in the past decade, and that is on this Government's watch and they must take responsibility for it.

Lisa Nandy: I defer to my hon. Friend on that. She has been a superb champion for housing reform in this country over many, many years, including under the last Labour Government, and particularly in the past decade when we have seen exactly what she describes unfold. She has done more to reform and tighten up the law in this area through the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018 than the Government have done in the past 12 years, so, absolutely, I defer to her on that.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. Does she also agree that one problem with the shortage of housing supply is

that Government support goes in completely the wrong direction, particularly in terms of buy to let, which I will speak about later if I get called, whereby billions of pounds are going to support private landlords?

Lisa Nandy: My right hon. Friend is right: it is a waste. It is a waste of human potential, a waste of good, thriving neighbourhoods, and a waste of taxpayers' money. It is more than that actually. The distortion in the housing market in these communities means that working families are being priced out of good, viable family homes. Other social tenants cannot access them either; when a person cannot get enhanced housing benefits, they are subject to the local housing allowance. The regulation is non-existent. Providers are exempt from planning and licensing laws that enable councils to limit the types and proliferation of houses of multiple occupation. The social housing regulator does not have the powers to deal with rogue operators as they set themselves up as small operators outside the direct oversight of the regulator. The effect of all of that is that whole streets and communities become saturated with family homes that are converted into HMOs, providing exempt accommodation and housing vulnerable tenants who are left without support. That creates problems for the whole community, and it is all happening in plain sight.

What is worse is that the people who are most affected—as I said to the hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden)—are those who cannot do anything about it. Only the Government have the power to make changes for the better, which is why today we are calling for a package of emergency measures to set this situation right.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): I am a fellow Greater Manchester MP. We have the “Places for Everyone” scheme that has been submitted to the Government. I am very sympathetic to a lot of what the hon. Lady has been talking about. In Wigan and Bury over many, many years—from the way that the hon. Lady is looking at me, I think she knows the important point that I am making—there has been a dearth of action by Labour-controlled councils to build and to provide affordable social housing. Does she share with me a disappointment that there is no plan within “Places for Everyone” to deliver that?

Lisa Nandy: The hon. Gentleman should spend some time with my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), because she would set him straight very quickly. I know his community very well—it is where I grew up and went to college, and it is where my mum lives—and he has a superb Labour council that backs its community at every turn and was part of dramatically improving the life chances of young people in its community and supporting the community. When Bury Football Club was collapsing, much to our desperate regret, it was his Labour council who stood by the community, while the Government stood and watched as the club fell apart.

James Daly: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lisa Nandy: I think the hon. Gentleman should listen for once. His Labour council has stood in as a lifeline for people as support was stripped away over 12 years of Tory Government. It is about time that he not only acknowledged that, but got behind his local community and started standing up to this Government.

The regulation is non-existent. This is all happening in plain sight. The regulations must be toughened up. We need a proper test for what counts as care, support or supervision set out in law. It is right of the Minister to say, as I heard him say in the Westminster Hall debate, that that must be done thoughtfully and with care, but that is no excuse for inaction. Surely it is not beyond the collective wit of Government to come up with a scheme that roots out the bad providers and protects the good.

We need a regulator with the full range of powers needed to deal with the problem, with a fit and proper person test that must be passed before any provider can set itself up to care for vulnerable people. Local authorities need the power to reject applications on grounds of saturation or oversupply in a specific area and to insist on community impact assessments that have the power to prevent such over-saturation.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests; I am a former local Labour councillor who tried to deal with these issues in our communities. Those powers are there, but does my hon. Friend agree that central Government frustrated local councils from using article 4 directions, for example, to manage that saturation, and that we need to move beyond that?

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Local councils cannot do this on their own. That is why we have brought the issue to the House today and why my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood brought it to Westminster Hall a few weeks ago. It is why we will keep going and keep on until councils have the powers and the support they need to end this scandal for good.

We need an inspections regime to keep providers on their toes and a regulator that has full powers of enforcement, both to clamp down on those who will still try to flout the system, and to destroy the business model of the rogue operators who know that they carry on in plain sight and get away with it. I know the Minister cares about this issue—he spoke very movingly about it in the Westminster Hall debate—but caring is not the same as acting.

These rogue operators have effectively been handed a licence by the Government to exploit people, abuse public money and destroy neighbourhoods. Bobby Kennedy once said that,

“there is another kind of violence, slower but just as deadly, destructive as the shot or the bomb in the night. This is the violence of institutions; indifference and inaction and slow decay.”

We cannot continue to be violently indifferent to what is being inflicted on communities up and down this country.

What is worse about this situation, for me, is that it is overseen by the Government Department that was created to support and rebuild proud neighbourhoods, towns, villages and cities—the places that once powered this country and built our wealth and influence, and could do so again. The Prime Minister stood in Coventry and promised to give us the tools to change our areas for the better. He said that,

“all they need is the right people to believe in them, to lead them and to invest in them and for Government to get behind them, and that is what we are going to do”,

but they have not.

I ask the Minister today to set this right. Can he tell his boss that this is not like the fight he just had and lost with the Treasury? He does not have to beg the Chancellor for funds and permission that are not forthcoming. He simply has to get his own Department in order and deliver. Otherwise, what is the Department for, if it cannot even get behind our communities when the power to do so lies squarely within its remit?

What were once modest, quiet residential streets, home to tight-knit communities, are becoming no-go areas, plagued by rogue operators, some with links to organised crime. People who work hard and try hard are left, for all their efforts, watching their community go to rack and ruin. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood has said many times, people are in utter despair. They are faced with a choice between leaving the places that they have always loved and called home or tolerating what is now an intolerable situation. That is no choice at all. We should not ask them to bear this for a single day longer. I commend this motion to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Could I encourage people who are intending to speak to actually stand, because otherwise I will not know?

4.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): I think it goes without saying that the matter we are here to discuss today is one of the utmost seriousness and utmost importance. It has far-reaching implications that go beyond the housing benefit bill and impact on the lives of hundreds of people who are among the most vulnerable in our society. There is no greater priority for any Government than protecting the welfare of our citizens and, wherever possible, preventing people from finding themselves living in accommodation that is poor in terms of quality and security.

During my years working for YMCA Birmingham, I saw first-hand just how tough and life-limiting it can be for people living in these kinds of homes, but I also saw the transformational difference that genuinely good-quality supported exempt accommodation makes to people, so, to put it mildly, I have a strong personal interest in us getting this right.

Kerry McCarthy: The fact that this debate is about non-commissioned exempt accommodation goes to the heart of it, because in an ideal situation Bristol would be able to commission all the supported housing that it needed to look after people in need within its own city boundaries. The situation we are getting now is suppliers moving in and buying up housing in inner-city areas, with other councils not taking responsibility for their own residents. If the Minister speaks to the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), he will find that there is a massive issue with people being sent there. Does he agree that this housing ought to be commissioned, if possible, rather than leaving it to the private sector?

Eddie Hughes: I strongly suspect that during the course of my speech there will be many interventions that I find myself in agreement with, and that is one example. Speaking personally, I have heard of people

[Eddie Hughes]

parking up outside prisons waiting for prisoners to leave and then taking them off to non-commissioned exempt accommodation. It is beholden on all of us to try to make sure that there is good-quality accommodation, that people are appropriately signposted to it, and—the hon. Lady is absolutely right—that wherever possible it is commissioned rather than non-commissioned accommodation.

I guess my job, and the job of this Government, is to improve the life chances of people living in these kinds of situations, and that is one of the main reasons that I came into politics. However, poorly conceived quick-fix answers are not going to help us to solve this problem. We are all in agreement on the urgency of the issue and we all share a determination to change things for the better, but if we want to tackle the problems that plague this sector, then the way to do it is through considered and meaningful reforms. What the sector needs is not sticking plasters but more support for the high-quality supported housing providers who are delivering services that are genuinely changing people's lives. The whole country is facing difficult economic headwinds, and those providers who are fulfilling their roles and helping to protect people by keeping a roof over their heads during this time of difficulty need support. I am therefore glad that this issue is drawing considerable interest from parliamentarians. Every single Member of this House will have constituents affected by it, and I am certain that through our collective efforts and collaboration we can work together across the House to solve these problems.

This kind of accommodation often acts as a safety net for people who have fallen on hard times. It helps them to get back on their feet and gives them the platform from which they can rebuild their lives. Its importance is difficult to overstate. Despite that, however, there are flagrant examples of rogue providers who are abusing the system and misusing taxpayers' money by not providing anywhere near the right standard of services for their residents. This failure is intertwined with the harsh reality of the concentrated proliferation of exempt accommodation in specific areas and cities. That is bringing its own set of challenges, with pockets of neighbourhood issues, antisocial behaviour and criminal behaviour, which is completely unacceptable.

We are not sitting on our hands. We have introduced a range of curbs to stem the growth of these organisations in areas right across the country, including in Birmingham. The Housing and Communities Research Group have combined with the Birmingham Safeguarding Adults Board to play a pivotal role in highlighting the growing number of shoddy, second-rate units that have been allowed to develop unchecked in Birmingham. Off the back of that, officials in my Department have worked tirelessly with Birmingham City Council and local charities to unpick these issues and to enhance our understanding of them. That work is already beginning to bring to light the full scale of the problem, its underlying drivers and, more importantly, the impact it has on residents and their communities.

John Redwood: Has the Minister made sure that all future contracts are properly set up and policed at the beginning, so that the Government know what they are buying?

Eddie Hughes: My right hon. Friend makes an interesting point, but we leave those decisions to councils that are commissioning locally. I guess it is up to us to try to ensure appropriate standards against which such accommodation is measured and then to give them the necessary powers to enforce that. Personally, I think that councils already have a considerable number of powers. I am not disagreeing with Opposition Members about what powers are required; I am just saying that I would like to see the existing powers used to the absolute max before we necessarily go reaching for others. If people feel they do not have the necessary powers, I would consider it not inappropriate for the Government to legislate, but we need to consider that carefully.

We are committed to finding the right approach to this issue, and we invested £5 million in a number of pilots in recent months to support the worst-affected areas, including Birmingham, Blackburn with Darwen, Blackpool, Bristol and Hull. Through the injection of those funds, we have been working with local authorities to test approaches to improving the quality of this type of accommodation. We chose these specific areas partly because of the existing commitment to tackle these issues, and I pay tribute to the local authorities, which have worked collegiately and collaboratively with us during the pilots.

To take Bristol as an example, it has been conducting thorough assessments of new schemes and providers for some time. The council was able to use its funding to complete its work in summer last year. Meanwhile, Hull's supported accommodation review team was implemented in 2019, and the council has already shown a strong commitment to making the changes needed to solve the problems besetting exempt accommodation. Through the pilot, it was able to fund a large part of its programme and to take its approach to that programme one step further. As the House would expect, we know that the need stretches beyond these pilot areas and that local authorities in other parts of the country want to invest in tackling these problems, too.

Lisa Nandy: This is a little frustrating, because there is a strong sense that we agree about this, yet it is difficult to work out why nothing yet has been done. The pilots were initiated in October 2020, so why have they not concluded and reported, and why have we not got a timetable by which action will be taken? Perhaps the Minister can give us that today.

Eddie Hughes: I have a horrible feeling that I will mention this point now and repeat it subsequently if I am not able to recalibrate in the course of my speech. We have the report from those pilots, and we are working with authorities and officials in my Department to unpick it and to ensure that we completely understand what the information we have gathered is telling us and that any changes we deploy in the future are appropriate. I completely accept and understand the hon. Lady's frustration. I am keen to see that report published as quickly as possible, and I am sure I will repeat that point later in my speech—my apologies for the duplication.

Some places have taken their inspiration from the work of those pilots and have set up teams bringing together different expertise, including housing benefit and environmental health officers, to focus on emerging issues. We have heard of, and been inspired by, the

initiative shown by local authorities such as Nottingham, which have implemented multidisciplinary approaches to supported housing within the council and with key external partners that have a critical role to play in the experience of supported housing tenants. That set-up enables local authorities to keep a constant stream of information going about rogue providers and to conduct consistent and thorough assessments of those organisations and their ability to deliver good support and good outcomes for tenants.

My Department has also been speaking to local authorities in Derby, Cannock Chase and Staffordshire, and to councils across Greater Manchester and Lancashire on those issues. We are engaging with them on how they are progressing. On top of that, I am delighted that work is taking place across boundaries as we are encouraging councils to share good practice so that others can apply it. For example, in Blackburn, housing benefit officers have been working closely with other local authorities in Manchester and Lancashire, discussing and learning from each other's experience while sharing their knowledge on the common issues that they are encountering locally.

The local pilots have been critical to helping us to understand how the issues are playing out in different places, but we know that they will not solve the issues on their own. At a national level, the Government have continued to act and to raise the bar on the standard of accommodation across the board. In 2020, the Department published the "Supported housing: national statement of expectations", which was vital in setting out the Government's vision for better ways of working in supported housing and for introducing much higher minimum standards in accommodation.

The guidance gave providers and councils a clear vision from the Government of exactly what good looks like while highlighting where providers and councils are working in a joined-up fashion to drive up quality. Ministers and officials have also engaged with councils, housing providers, the regulator of social housing and other regulatory bodies to help us to improve our understanding of the issues and to refine our approach.

Although I have not yet received the report, I assure hon. Members that the work of the pilots has already delivered, and is delivering, real results by creating the kind of models for best practice that councils will be able to adopt. In Birmingham, a charter of rights for residents of supported housing has been developed along with a programme of support reviews and scrutiny of housing benefit claims. In Blackpool, the council has carried out a review of the support provided in accommodation for victims of domestic abuse to ensure that it is sufficient and tailored. We have seen great examples in other pilots of local government and the community working together to improve supported exempt accommodation.

Once published and made available to interested parties, the evaluation report will help us to tailor what action is needed and will be taken in future, but this is a complex area. It is important to take the time to consider the next steps carefully to ensure that we get them right. We must be careful to avoid knee-jerk measures that could have unforeseen consequences and only serve to make life harder for residents and the majority of good providers, who we would not wish to see inadvertently pushed out of the vital work that they do in the area.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I hear the good work that the Minister is doing on the pilots, but what is to stop a rogue landlord, who wants to just take the cash and provide no services, carrying on as before in the pilot areas that he is talking about?

Eddie Hughes: The hon. Lady gives me the opportunity to make an important point. The "more than minimal" line was not prescribed in law—to a degree, one might say that it is even worse than that, because it came about through case law and legal challenge. Landlords and the services that they provide are a difficult area and are difficult for councils to challenge.

Fortunately, through the pilots, we have been able to help to educate council officers and explain best practice so that they have been able to challenge. The problem is that that needs to be focused and done all the time. Obviously, any council can challenge the support that is being provided, but that requires the council to put in the effort—perhaps to go round and visit the property and speak to the tenants to understand the support that is being provided—and determine whether it feels that meets the threshold and subsequently challenge. Part of the problem is that councils have done that, but because of the low level, they have lost such challenges. We need to ensure that we are helping those providers because there are a lot of good providers out there. We need to do our best to support and encourage them and then, I hope, signpost people to the appropriate accommodation for them. I appreciate and accept the difficult situation, but as I say, I hope that we will understand best practice better from the pilots and share it more widely. As I have said, should legislative changes be required, that is not something we would shy away from.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): But this is bigger than just the regulation. What we have in the most deprived communities, such as Walton and Anfield, is property management companies in London, Milton Keynes and other parts of the country buying up swathes of property to run a supported housing racket. It needs intervention from Government.

Eddie Hughes: Just as a particular example, it is possible for councils to investigate such properties, and where landlords are seen to be letting out unsafe properties, they can apply for banning orders and fines of up to £30,000 are available, so powers are available—

Dan Carden *indicated dissent.*

Eddie Hughes: I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman is shaking his head, but I would just say that councils need to be encouraged to use the legislation already available to them to the max before we reach for a legislative answer to the problem.

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): The Minister is well aware that, if councils make a decision not to provide housing benefit and they are challenged in a court of law, they will lose such cases because the law itself is not sufficiently tight to prevent the abuse that is occurring. I would like to push the Minister: he has implied that he does not want to move quickly on tightening up the regulations because he is concerned about the impact that would have on the good providers, which we all agree are trying to do the

[Shabana Mahmood]

best they can in difficult circumstances, but what is it about tightening up the regulations that would be so onerous for the good providers and take out the bad providers? The way I see it, the good providers are doing what they should be doing anyway, and it is only the bad providers that would be targeted by tightening up the regulations. I really do want to hear from him what he thinks would be onerous on the good providers if he tightens up the regulations.

Eddie Hughes: I agree largely with what the hon. Lady says, but on what other burdens we may place on people to meet the barriers to entry or the conditions we set, we are talking about providers that work on very low margins, and any further legislative burden placed on them may just push them out of the market. On my reservation to act quickly, I am very keen to deal with this problem as quickly as we can, and I strongly suspect that she and I will be having many conversations in the coming weeks and months. I am hoping that progress will be made—so we will talk again.

It is interesting that the hon. Lady intervened at that point, because I was about to refer to the Westminster Hall debate she held recently. One of the things that struck me about that debate was that very well-tempered, very well-informed and very passionate contributions were made across the Chamber, and it feels to me as though the spirit of that debate will be extended today in the way we discuss this problem and tackle it in the future. I think we should continue in that tone, because this is not a political issue. It is something we all care about passionately, and we can all see that rogue landlords are taking money and using it inappropriately when we are talking about some of the most vulnerable people in society.

Finally, there are some exceptional providers out there that provide great-quality accommodation. They have very passionate and dedicated staff, and I would hate to think that they were in any way tarred with the brush of these rogue providers. As well as dealing with the rogue landlords, we should celebrate the success and the great work that is done by others for some of the most vulnerable in society. I look forward to the rest of the debate.

4.49 pm

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the tone of his response to my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy). Perhaps we can wait to see whether the actions match that tone. I take issue with him on a point he made a few moments ago, which was that this is not a political issue. For as long as this issue exists, without any further regulation or resources to resolve it, it is political. We are not necessarily trying to turn it into a party political issue, but we need a political solution to sort it out.

I rise to support the motion in the name of my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition, my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan and others. My hon. Friend the Member for Wigan put the case with characteristic clarity and force, so I will not repeat her arguments. I do, however, support the approach of the homelessness charity Crisis, which calls on the Government to outline when they plan to publish the findings and evaluations of exempt accommodation pilots in Birmingham, Hull, Blackpool, Bristol and Blackburn.

The Minister referred to those pilots a few moments ago in his speech, and I did not see in anything he said any reason why their findings cannot be published. Will he reflect on whether it would be helpful if a lot of other organisations had the opportunity to look at those findings and make helpful suggestions?

Secondly, Crisis calls on the Government to identify ways to close loopholes in the regulatory frameworks that oversee the provision of exempt accommodation, while at the same time ensuring that local authorities are adequately resourced and supported to implement that oversight framework. As others have made clear, local authorities cannot do what they do not have the powers or resources to do. Thirdly, Crisis calls for an improvement in the data captured about exempt housing benefit claims, so that future statistics can provide an accurate picture of the scale of the provision and trends. Finally, it calls on the Government to develop and strengthen the national statement of expectations for supported housing, so as to provide an effective quality assurance for all forms of exempt accommodation. If the Minister has not already read those recommendations, I hope he will look at them and consider where he can go with them in the short term, because they are important.

For the remainder of my speech I want to deal with the broader context of the problem as referred to in the motion, such as the way the private rented sector is regulated, buy-to-let support from the Government, and how financial support is given. There are currently—even I was shocked by this—4.4 million households in the country who rent their homes from a private landlord. That figure is from 2019-20, so it is likely to be an underestimate of the true scale. The English housing survey of 2019 estimated that 23% of homes in the sector—about 1.1 million—do not meet the decent homes standard. That compares with just 12% of homes in the social rented sector, which is still unacceptable but considerably lower. There is genuine cause for concern that local authority enforcement powers cannot be used as consistently and forcefully as they should be, because of the resources and appropriate regulations. As the Marmot review concluded, that has an impact on the health, safety and wellbeing of those who rent from private landlords. In Knowsley, we have about 7,300 private renters—people who rent from private landlords—who are a considerable source of complaints that I have to try to deal with, as the local MP, along with local councillors. I am sure that other colleagues find the same.

A report by the Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence published in August 2020 made these recommendations, which I fully support. First, “advice and guidance available to local authorities on regulating” the private rented sector should be improved. Secondly, local authorities need better data on the private rented sector in England, so

“a national registration system of all landlords and letting agents should be introduced”

—and that should be done quickly.

Thirdly:

“Local authorities should receive, and allocate, adequate funding to develop appropriate and effective responses to the changing nature and context of the PRS.”

Fourthly:

“Clearer sentencing guidelines need to be provided to criminal courts and tribunals to ensure that punishment is proportionate to the nature of the offence.”

Finally:

“Trading standards should have the power to serve civil penalties against the company directors who are the controlling figures behind a non-compliant company.”

It is fair to conclude that the power imbalance between tenants and private landlords puts tenants at a risk of eviction or rent rises when they legitimately seek repairs and maintenance to their homes. The same concerns apply to exempt accommodation, where people are in a vulnerable situation and unable to use the resources available to them to pursue that.

There is also concern about a lack of understanding of rights and responsibilities on the part of landlords and tenants. Research commissioned by Citizens Advice in 2019 entitled “Getting the house in order: How to improve standards in the private rented sector” highlighted the lack of understanding and knowledge of housing in the private rented sector. It found that nine out of 10 tenants did not know whether a repairing responsibility was theirs or their landlord’s—how can they assert their rights when they do not know what they are? One in four landlords were unable to correctly identify any of the potential outcomes of failing to meet their obligations towards tenants, and one in three landlords found it difficult to keep up with rules and regulations. If the people letting properties do not understand, what chance have the tenants got?

I return to the buy-to-let scheme and its effect on the sector. What public policy objective does the scheme and increases in the private rented sector serve? It is worth noting that the number of people with property wealth outside their main residence rose from 3.6 million in 2001 to 5.5 million in 2014-15. I have been unable to find more up-to-date figures, but, again, that almost certainly underestimates the picture now. Buy-to-let is the largest contributing factor to the growth of private landlords. The system is attractive for landlords because they get mortgage interest tax relief on private rented property and, tragically, because shorthold tenancies enable them to evict tenants easily. But it is hardly a panacea for giving tenants more security of access to decent homes.

In the eight years from 2008 to 2016, additional properties, which includes second homes—people have them for all sorts of reasons; I do not question that—accounted for £6 trillion of property wealth. That is a staggering sum—we talk about international conflicts costing that sort of money—and that requires us to pay serious attention to it.

According to the English Private Landlord Survey, there are some 1.5 million private landlords, while other studies put the figure as high as 1.7 million. Either way, it is a source of prolific growth that has led to further intergenerational inequality. Second homes are owned by some of the wealthiest members of each generation, including private landlords, and predominantly by those born in the 1950s and 1960s. The net effect is that more of today’s young adults will not be able to become homeowners and will have no choice other than to rent in the private rented sector.

The policy implications of those trends are that additional properties should be taxed at least as heavily, if not more so, than primary residences. The Resolution Foundation’s commission on intergenerational inequality recommended: halving the rates of stamp duty on main properties at a cost of £2.7 billion across Great Britain

in 2020, with existing first-time buyer reliefs retained; introducing a time-limited capital gains reduction for owners of multiple properties looking to exit the market when they sell to a first-time buyer; and replacing council tax with a new progressive property tax, which I think is widely accepted as important and necessary.

As I move towards the end of my speech, it is worth returning to the question I posed earlier: what public policy objective does the buy-to-let scheme and the consequent growth of private landlords serve? Given that a decent home should be a right, it cannot be the case that in a prolonged period of a national shortage of housing, which was referred to earlier, the source of additional housing should be through private landlords who, at best, see them as a source of profit and, unfortunately, in some cases, as a way of laundering dirty money, whether from home or abroad. From my own city region and my own constituency, I know that a lot of drug money is being laundered into private landlord lets. In some cases—the Government really should be worried about this—I suspect they are being subsidised by the Government through the buy-to-let scheme. That, surely, cannot be an acceptable way to deal with things.

The Government should be helping people in housing need into either the social rented sector or owner occupation. That applies equally to exempted property. As a country, we urgently need to change direction, so that the right to a decent home is a primary policy objective and that the onward march of the private rented sector is halted in its tracks.

5.3 pm

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth), who made a lot of important points. I agree with him and I welcome the tone of the debate. This is an incredibly important issue and I welcome the consensus we are hearing. A lot of Members mentioned big cities, where there is clearly a very big problem, but I would like to flag that it is not limited by geography, social class or anything like that. So-called wealthy areas still suffer from pockets of deprivation. People in those areas still have vulnerabilities—mental health and domestic abuse know no dividing lines—so there is a wider application that makes it even more important that we discuss this issue, and that consensus is very useful.

It is almost a truism to say that everyone deserves a stable, secure and supported environment in which to live and thrive. That is a human right and when people do not have that, it makes everything else worse. This affects the most vulnerable in our society doubly because they already have needs, and then not having that environment impacts on them in a different way. I saw that time and again in my decade as a magistrate. People came before us with complex support needs and them having the right support, including housing and supported housing, was a big part of that.

James Daly: My hon. Friend is making some excellent points. In a previous life, I was a criminal defence solicitor for 16 years. I used to stand up and say, as the main point of my mitigation, “Can you sentence this person to a house?”, because a house is stability. Does she agree that some of the problems that we have heard

[James Daly]

today mean that rehabilitation and some of the real issues that go the heart of the criminal justice system are ignored?

Julie Marson: I thank my hon. Friend; I am trying to make exactly that point. Having a revolving door in the criminal justice system does not help anyone. It does not help victims or perpetrators. Supported housing and getting people the right support at the right time, in the context of secure, safe and decent housing, to a decent standard, is very much part of the solution. I welcome the Minister's comments because he recognises that, as do the Government. It is important to recognise that there are many organisations out there providing caring support and working tirelessly to do so in conjunction with local councils. I am sure that we all welcome that across the House and want to expand the cohort of good, responsible, caring providers.

We must focus on the rogue providers that we are talking about, because they are a scourge on this activity and on the efforts of so many good providers. Rogue providers profit on the back of the most vulnerable in our society, and that damages not only the most vulnerable, but taxpayers and our society in a wider context. We have heard from the Minister and seen from Government actions that that has been recognised. We recognise how important that is and how important it is to drive up standards.

I welcome the Minister's extra detail about the five pilot projects and the more than £5 million that has gone into supporting them. This is about learning the lessons, not putting on a sticking plaster. It is about bringing innovation, new ideas and experience to how we tackle this issue across the country. The national statement of expectations, setting minimum standards, helps in that regard. I hear comments about the flaws in them but that is an important concept that we need to focus on and constantly review to improve those standards all the time.

When I was a magistrate, I specialised in domestic abuse courts, and I was privileged to sit on the Bill Committee last year for what became the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. I want to emphasise how important that Act was in bringing together so many different elements that recognise women and children—the whole family—as victims of domestic abuse and in bringing into that equation the importance of safety, security and protective accommodation for women and children affected by domestic abuse. That exemplifies the Government's commitment, because that issue was intrinsic to the Bill, and that lifeline was supported by £125 million of funding.

During the pandemic and since we have seen a focus on rough sleeping from the Government. The fact that this area involves domestic abuse, mental and physical vulnerabilities and rough sleeping shows us how complex it is, with multifaceted approaches needed to different problems. We have invested more than £200 million to deliver the commitment to provide 14,500 bed spaces, plus another £433 million for the rough sleeping accommodation programme. It is not a one-size-fits-all approach, but the actions of the Government prove that there is a commitment not only to improve, constantly change and review where we are, but to provide the

funding that goes along with that. I welcome the debate, welcome the Minister's comments and welcome the consensus across the House.

5.10 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): At any one time, there will always be tens of thousands—probably hundreds of thousands—of people throughout our society who need help and support, including housing support. They are the most vulnerable people any of us will deal with. They include people leaving prison, people leaving the National Asylum Support Service, people fleeing domestic violence, and people whose homelessness is made worse by factors such as substance dependence or mental health needs. Without the right housing support and the support that wraps around housing, the circumstances that leave them vulnerable will be made dramatically worse.

I do not believe that there was a golden age—there is a degree of consensus in that respect. However, I do not think it is possible to argue that there were not conditions in place years ago whose absence has led to the present situation, which in some parts of the country is nothing less than a crisis. Many people at a point of vulnerability could once have accessed social housing and/or intervention and support from local authorities, including through schemes such as Supporting People that simply no longer exist. As a consequence, many of those people are left adrift, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth) said, at the bottom end of a private rented sector that is unregulated, as has been well documented, or in conditions that are now classified as being part of exempt accommodation.

If we get this right, and many providers do get it right, the experience of supported housing will transform people's lives and give them an opportunity. Often, their needs are transitional and they are able to get back on their feet after fleeing domestic violence or coming out of prison. That is exactly what we want—again, there is cross-party agreement. I commend the many individuals, charities and other organisations working in the field; they are often underpaid, and they deserve all our thanks for working in extremely challenging circumstances.

If we get this wrong, we will find that we are wasting public money at scale—as I believe we are doing—and letting down extremely vulnerable people. I do not think it an exaggeration to say that in some cases we are casting them back into the kind of crisis of physical or mental health from which we are notionally trying to help them escape. As I am sure hon. Members who represent constituencies more directly affected than mine will say, the situation is also causing a crisis in neighbourhoods because of the over-concentration of some of the poorest types of accommodation. This has been happening at an escalating pace over the past five or six years. There are now 150,000 people in the sector: the numbers have gone up by well over half in the past few years.

I am well aware, and want to hear from colleagues, that exempt accommodation and its associated problems are overwhelmingly concentrated in areas such as the midlands and in cities such as Leeds and Sheffield. In a way it is no surprise, because the landlords and providers who see an opportunity to make money—this has been described as a gold rush—will exploit cheap accommodation, particularly houses in multiple occupation,

that they can buy cheaply and rent out at the maximum level they can extort from the state, providing next to no services in exchange. They walk away rich, and their tenants and residents are left in terrible circumstances.

Central London has largely escaped the worst of that, simply because it is clearly less profitable for landlords to move into that market, and less easy to buy up and make a killing. However, it is striking that some of the largest apparent increases—here I must sound a note of caution about the data that we should all be able to share, data that I would love the Government to have more of and to be able to tell us more about—are now occurring in inner London, including my own borough.

We do not know for certain whether all the accommodation in this sector was classified on the same date—the information is not always comparable or reliable—but I can say that while there is a clear economic argument for exempt accommodation to be based in cheaper areas, some of this appears to be less about the economic drivers than about landlords and providers talking to each other, seeing opportunities in a particular area, and then piling in and exploiting those opportunities. Sometimes when the market becomes saturated, or a local authority such as Birmingham starts working effectively to clamp down in a particular area, they will up sticks and move somewhere else where they think they can make a killing. Some of that is likely to happen in London, but it could happen anywhere in the country. There is a danger that a bit of a whack-a-mole is going on, and that the whole process is too slow for anyone to keep track of what is going on in the real world, because it is likely that the crisis currently affecting cities such as Birmingham will be somewhere else in a few months' time.

Why have we seen this situation emerge, and what do we need to do about it? The first point is that we know very little. We need more information from the pilots; we have had too little, too late. The truth is that a deregulatory approach in areas where we should not have deregulated has left the Government in the dark, and that needs to change.

Secondly, it is clear that the decade-long local authority funding crisis plays a major role. Supporting People was a valuable programme, and the ring fence was lifted during a time of reasonable economic success when local authorities were being properly supported for the work that they were doing. However, as a result of the removal of the ring fence combined with the crisis in local authority funding, we saw £1.6 billion disappear from the sector as local authorities had to deal with the crisis in statutory services, particularly care services, and a number of people with significant but less often statutory care needs were neglected as a consequence.

If local authorities cannot provide funding for support services, that will inevitably have an impact on the quality of care that residents receive. It means that the only funding available to cross-subsidise service costs comes from the profit that landlords make on rents. The end of the Supporting People programme and the quality assurance framework that accompanied it, subsequently compounded by reductions in social security after 2011, created the conditions that led to the emergence of some of the poorest-quality services and the consequent risk to residents. It is worth pointing out that Supporting People had a built-in regulatory framework because of

the nature of the contracting system, and of course that went too. The decade-long downward pressure on other housing options, about which we have already heard, was another factor. The social housing grant was halved in 2010, and housing support for renters was also slashed, which left hundreds of thousands of people in housing need competing at the bottom of the private rented market.

Thirdly—and, in my view, most importantly—there are significant gaps in the relevant regulatory systems which the ruthless and the indifferent will always exploit to their own advantage. As *Inside Housing* makes clear in a characteristically excellent analysis,

“case law states that there only needs to be a ‘more than minimal’ level of care and support to qualify as ‘exempt’, meaning some providers can reap huge rental yields”

while providing almost no support.

So, we have a situation where exempt accommodation is not required to meet any specific property standards or standards of management and where many properties are exempt from the licensing requirements that otherwise apply to houses in multiple occupation.

The Minister was keen to stress the role that local authorities should have in inspection and regulation, but it is worth noting that environmental health services on the frontline of this kind of regulation have taken a major hit from 10 years of reduced spending in local government. Not all local authorities will apply the same degree of rigour and interest in this field, but there is no doubt that the lack of resources available for environmental health officers is a critical part of the problem. So, once again we find ourselves in a situation where those most in need receive some of the weakest protection, with consequences for them and, where concentrations of these properties build up, for their neighbours. Moving away from a regulatory framework that is enforced by the Government and by local government to a situation in which the subsidy applies to individual residents through the housing benefit system means that we are relying on those very vulnerable people to exercise some degree of control themselves and to try to enforce standards on their own. When they have so little bargaining power, that is not going to be realistic.

There is much that can be done to improve the situation, not least through the better management of housing stock through licensing, through the requirement for providers to meet a fit and proper person test, through better information sharing and through tougher penalties being used against landlords who breach the rules or who get around the rules by setting up a new company after having been found to be in breach. But changes to the regulatory framework have to be backed by inspection and, where necessary, enforcement. It is simply no good, as we have seen so clearly in recent years, to set new rules and simply hope that everyone will behave themselves. Some of the providers operate with goodwill, but they will always be undercut by the rogues. The fact is that the issues in the exempt accommodation sector do not exist in a vacuum. If we undermine support and housing services generally, this is where we will inevitably end up. The Government need to bear down on what has been a regulatory failure, but also to look at the bigger picture; otherwise, they will be shutting more stable doors for many years to come.

5.21 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): It is a genuine honour to follow the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck). We have sat through many meetings of the all-party parliamentary group on legal aid over many months. She personifies the best of this place, in that what motivates her is hopefully what motivates all of us here: the desire to find solutions. Solutions are never simple, however, and this is a very important debate on a hugely significant issue.

Many different strands feed into the solutions that we need to address this issue, but the underlying problem—dare I say it—is one of levelling up. The sector contains accommodation that is provided for those with support needs. It is the aim and desire of this Government's policy, of the Opposition and of every politician here that the solutions to those support needs are bespoke and are seen to help, to drive forward change in a person's life and to give them the best chance to enrich their life with positive experiences. However, that is not happening. In certain parts of the country, rogue landlords are charging the taxpayer a fortune and essentially providing no support whatsoever. That is absolutely morally bankrupt.

We are very lucky, in that the Minister for Housing, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), is a genuinely good man. Having spoken to him about this, I know that the words he says are genuinely meant. He wants to find a solution. He wants to work with the Opposition, and I am delighted by the tone of this debate. He is a good man and I know that he will work to ensure that we have a response that is appropriate to address some of these needs. We have heard a number of interesting speeches, and the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth) made a very good speech highlighting the housing market and buy to let. He asked what we as politicians wanted to do to set up a housing market that worked for people. I think he was suggesting—he will correct me if I am wrong—that we should ban second homeowners.

Sir George Howarth: I did say that there were also a lot of legitimate reasons for people wanting to own a second home. What I am concerned about is those who are acquiring additional properties just in order to let them.

James Daly: The right hon. Gentleman raises a fair point.

As I said in my intervention on the shadow Secretary of State, the motion says the sector is being impacted by “a chronic shortage of genuinely affordable housing, reductions in funding for housing-related support, new barriers to access for single adults requiring social rented housing”.

I agree. For a single person in my borough it is nigh on impossible to get any accommodation whatsoever. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson), I battled for 16 years to get housing for clients with the most acute social problems. I told court after court that unless these people were put somewhere with appropriate support and stable accommodation, the sentence imposed by the justice system would be pointless, because they would come back. I said the same thing time and again, and nothing ever changed.

We must be open and honest, and we must not be critical. We have to think about how we can improve the housing stock in all our boroughs. When I start my contribution by saying that we do not have enough housing for people in my borough, there is clearly something wrong and we have to do something about it.

We have a plan called “Places for Everyone” on Greater Manchester's strategic housing need. It has been submitted to the Secretary of State, and I am sure it will come across the Minister's path at some point. Such documents will affect all our areas, and certainly the areas that the shadow Secretary of State and I represent, for years to come. In a document of well over 300 pages, I can find virtually no reference to social housing or social rented housing. This is our strategic housing plan to meet the needs of individuals in Bury and elsewhere.

Throughout my 10 years as a councillor in Bury, I said that our housing stock is far too expensive. It costs more than £300,000 to buy a three-bedroom house in the vast majority of my constituency in the north of England, which is beyond people, certainly people with support needs. There is a glaring and obvious need to build social rented housing and genuinely affordable housing in Bury. There are brownfield sites in the borough that could be used for this purpose, and we still do not have it. We can talk about sticking plasters to address the problem, but we also have to focus on the long-term strategy to overcome it.

The only such provision in Greater Manchester's strategic plan for the next 25 years says:

“Make provision for affordable housing in accordance with local planning policy requirements, equivalent to at least 25% of the dwellings on the site and across a range of housing types and sizes (with an affordable housing tenure split of 60% social or affordable rented and 40% affordable home ownership)”.

In a document of many hundreds of pages, that is it. That is literally it. There is no bespoke plan—the shadow Secretary of State has disappeared—whether it is in Wigan, Rochdale or wherever it may be. Unless we have that plan, social rented housing will not be at the centre of public policy. Local authorities cannot run away from this. The temptation of local authorities of all political persuasions is always to blame the Government for everything.

Ruth Cadbury: Is the hon. Gentleman not aware that local authorities cannot put anything about social rented housing in their strategic plan without a Government commitment to fund it? My council, Hounslow, is building 1,300 council homes, almost all of it from the council's own proceeds. That is it, and the council is doing it at a slower rate than the right to buy. Even at this rate, the council is losing council homes because it does not have the funding from central Government. We were building hundreds of thousands of new council homes in previous decades because they were funded by Conservative and Labour Governments, and he needs to be challenging his Government to do that now.

James Daly: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention, but, in respect of Greater Manchester, I think she has answered her own question. If what she says is the case, what an indictment it is of the Labour councils in Greater Manchester that they have not even bothered applying for the Government funding that would underpin that long-term strategy. I have been a councillor for a

long time and we have been asking them for that strategy, in order to take advantage. I could cite the billions of pounds that are available to support these strategies, but Labour councils in my area—[*Interruption.*] Heads are being shaken, but Labour councils in my area have made no effort to address this problem. I want to take this opportunity in this Chamber to encourage my local councils to be as proactive as the hon. Lady's.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): My hon. Friend rightly mentions housing supply and making sure we have a balance on that, as well as having affordable housing for people. Does he agree that the proposals in the recent White Paper on levelling up and looking at what more we can do with brownfield sites give local authorities more of an opportunity to explore that, think outside the box a little and provide the kind of homes he has mentioned?

James Daly: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. The desire and policy of this Government is to ensure that we have beautiful homes developed for the benefit of everyone in our country, and there is money behind this: a £12 billion boost for affordable homes, including social rented homes, to help those with physical or mental challenges; and £5.4 million of additional funding for a pilot scheme in key areas, helping us to understand the most effective interventions for future national policy. We are also introducing a higher minimum standard for supported accommodation. So the money and the desire are there, and the policy direction from central Government says that local authorities come to us—[*Interruption.*] I am answering the point that has just been made. We want to support councils on this. We want to provide the funding that is going to develop those brownfield sites in their boroughs, but what are the Government to do if local authorities do not even have that conversation with the Government? I am assuming that the councils have not had it with the Mayor of Greater Manchester. What is the point if they do not do that? I am known as a collegiate parliamentarian, and I am simply here to encourage my local authority in Bury to work with the Government, who want to work with it to ensure that we get the housing stock that is absolutely needed in our borough. I am proud to be part of a Government who have this strategy, want to support local accommodation and do not take the view of my local authority. This is a difference of opinion. My local authority, in terms of prioritising social need, social housing or social rented housing, believes in the policy document, and believes in building four-bedroom and five-bedroom houses on the green belt. That is its choice, as a local Labour authority. I believe, and support this Government's intention, that we should be prioritising the development of brownfield sites, and ensuring that people have access to a home and that those support services are in place. In my local authority, over the 18 months of the pandemic, over £180 million was provided, on top of the normal grant funding, to support important services—

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Fewer than 6,000 homes for social rent were built last year. The homes in the “affordable homes” programme are not affordable at all—it is a skewed, vandalised definition of “affordable homes”. Local councils, certainly in Greater Manchester, and up and down the country, have their hands tied behind their back; they cannot build those social rented homes. They cannot do it.

James Daly: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the definition of what “affordable housing” is in respect of the percentages in new housing developments. The hon. Gentleman, whom I like very much, puts the point on this. Sadly, my local authority shares that attitude of not doing anything and being beaten before it starts, rather than looking at the relationships with Government, in order to provide the funding and the vision, which has been offered by Bury Conservatives for many years. That is the vision we need.

Mr Mahmood: Birmingham set out its own house building programme, but it has not been able to provide the volume of housing that it needs because of the Government restrictions. It is not that Birmingham does not want to build houses; it does want to build houses itself, but it was not able to do it.

James Daly: I hope the hon. Gentleman will speak to the Labour leader of Bury Council and encourage him to set up his own housing company, as we have been suggesting, to address some of the needs and provide the housing needed for people who come into the sector. I agree completely with the sentiment that has been expressed in the debate.

I know that you would not wish me to sit down, Mr Deputy Speaker, without correcting a comment made by the shadow Secretary of State—I am sure inadvertently—about Bury football club. I refer to Gigg Lane, which relates to this discussion in that one way we sought to ensure that Gigg Lane was truly representative of the community was to investigate the possibility of putting social housing there. Over the two and a half years since September 2019, when I first stood up in Bury Council and addressed the matter, we have been looking to those types of conversations and actions to improve housing and support services. During that period, Labour-controlled Bury Council has provided no help, assistance, money or contribution whatsoever for the purchase of Gigg Lane. I just wanted to make that correction. Gigg Lane, as part of the levelling-up agenda, was paid for with £1 million provided by the Government, to make it a central part of the Government's levelling-up agenda.

5.35 pm

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): I am pleased to contribute to such an important debate. The Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), is aware of my long-standing interest in this subject and I look forward to the further discussions he alluded to that will take place as the pilot reports are all completed and we think about the next steps, particularly in respect of the legislative framework.

We should be clear that we are talking about a situation unfolding throughout the country, as we all speak, in which rogue landlords, total cowboy operators and some with links to organised crime groups and established criminal enterprises, are getting their hands on taxpayers' cash—our constituents' money—and not using it for the purposes for which it was intended but simply lining their own pockets, and they are able to do so with absolute impunity. That situation is the subject matter of this debate: the fact that so many people can do such terrible abusive things, well within the rules,

[*Shabana Mahmood*]

and totally get away with it. No criminal enterprise is going to get done for abusing taxpayers' cash in this way, and that is a problem of the law.

I take issue with the Minister's saying earlier in the debate that

"this is not a political issue".

I agree with him in that I do not wish this to be a party political football with which we play knockabout in the Chamber, but this is a deeply political issue. It is full of political choices. We have talked a lot about local authorities, what local government can do or does not do and all this "he said, she said" about local government powers, but the fundamental problem and the failure in respect of the subject matter of this debate is one of the law itself, and only the Government have the power to change the law of this land. This is an arena of politics, but it is also the UK legislature. We are pushing the Government today not because of matters of party politics but because only they can act to prevent the abuses that we are all seeing unfold across our constituencies.

There is no point in my going to the chief constable of West Midlands police and saying, "I know that a drug dealer is basically setting up as a housing provider in my constituency, is going to get enhanced housing benefit payments, is going to line his own pockets and is probably going to abuse some of the poor, vulnerable constituents who end up in the property he manages," because I know the chief constable can do nothing about it—not a single thing. That is the problem that I and all Members in this House with experience in this matter are desperate for the Government to fix. The problem is the law and only the Government can fix the law.

Brendan Clarke-Smith: I fully take the hon. Lady's point about rogue landlords, whom we absolutely must tackle. Does she agree that the way to do so is through making sure that higher minimum standards are in place? For example, the national statement of expectations is there. Does the hon. Lady agree that is the best route to make sure that standards are adhered to?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. I accept that it is meant to be in the spirit of being helpful and adding to the debate, but the idea that criminal enterprises currently lining their pockets with our constituents' money will be put off exploiting this business model because of a national statement of expectation is absolutely for the birds. I am sorry, but that will not work here. If it did, I would support it, because I want this problem fixed. I am desperate to see vulnerable people no longer being exploited and communities no longer being destroyed, but that measure will not cut it. These are proper operators and they have spotted a loophole in the law. They have calculated correctly that, instead of going further into the drugs business where they might have to do 20 years in prison, they can just get into the housing sector and no one will put them away for it—at all. In fact, they can do so in plain sight and nobody can do a thing about it. That is what I want the Government to take action on, because that is what I have seen in my own constituency of Birmingham, Ladywood. That is what my colleagues in Birmingham have seen in their constituencies, and some of them have truly horrific examples of abuse of vulnerable tenants.

We are seeing that problem all across the country. I was very grateful to the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson) for saying that this is national issue. It can become a little too easy for Members in this place to think that this is a problem for some cities—let us be honest, if we are to be party political about this, it is problem for some Labour-run cities. As my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) said, piecemeal action—a pilot here and a little bit of a change there—just creates a whack-a-mole system. A problem that starts in Birmingham will soon spread to Sandwell, to Stoke and then to Dudley, and to other places too, unless we have a national change in the law of our land that stops the problem dead for everybody. Then, a Member whose constituency is currently not afflicted by it would not have to worry about a proliferation of exempt accommodation taking place in their patch. If they do have it in their constituency already, they could at least see that there was an end in sight to this absolute abuse of the system, which, as Mr Deputy Speaker can tell, leaves most of us utterly impotent with rage because, unless the Government change the law, we can simply not fix this problem.

The first area of the law that requires change is the "more than minimal" test, which has been discussed today. The Minister made the point that the "more than minimal" requirement for the access to enhanced housing benefit regulations has come about as a matter of case law. He is, of course, right; that was done by a housing benefit tribunal. In this country, though, we do not distinguish between case law and Acts of Parliament or statutory instruments. The law is the law and if a judicial authority—a judge or a tribunal—comes to a clarification or a statement of the law that is against what the Government expect to happen, all that creates is a system that is open to abuse. It is the job of this legislature, this House of Commons, to put it right, and only the Government have the power to introduce that legislation to make it so. That rule—the "more than minimal" requirement—must be changed. It must be tightened up.

I do not buy the argument that, somehow, tightening up the access to enhanced housing benefit will somehow drive the good providers out of the sector. That is also for the birds. Those providers are already doing the things that are required in order to help vulnerable people turn their lives around. In the end, that is the thing in which we should all be interested. These are people who have escaped abusive relationships, who have come out of the prison system and are desperate to turn their lives around, and who have had addiction issues and need help to turn their lives around. They need good quality housing in order to do that. The hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly) was right when he said that people should be sentenced to a house so that they can have stability—the stability that is required to help them turn their life around and become a citizen able to play their full part in society once more. That is not possible if the rogue operators get their hands on these people first. The good providers, who have a moral and a social mission when it comes to supported housing, will already be doing the right thing. I do not buy the idea that they will be pushed out of the system if the regulations for access to the cash in the first place are tightened up.

The Government and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in particular, rather than the Department for Work and Pensions, need to

tighten up the broader regulatory framework. It should not be possible to be providing housing to some of the most vulnerable people in our country and to not even have to pass some sort of character test. The idea that the good providers who are operating will fail fit and proper persons tests is a joke. They will pass it because they have a social, moral mission and they can prove their track record in helping people to turn their lives around. If they do not pass it, they should not have access to vulnerable people in the first place. We know what happens when vulnerable people get into bad accommodation: they are ripe for further abuse, ripe for further grooming into drug activity, and ripe for further grooming into sexual exploitation. We should not allow any provider who cannot pass a fit and proper person's test to get anywhere near some of these people because they will exacerbate the problem rather than alleviate it. Frankly, I have no sympathy with anyone who we currently think of as a good provider but who ends up failing that test, because it proves they were not a good provider in the first place.

We also need more powers for local authorities—a point that was also raised earlier in the debate—to prevent the dumping of problem people from one part of a country to another. I accept that there are some classes of vulnerable individuals who need to break the link with their local area if they are going to turn their lives around, but that is not the case for the vast majority of people who have ended up in exempt supported accommodation.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. She speaks from deep experience and her legal background stands her in good stead on these important matters. Does she agree that this is part of a series of problems where the Government have got the emphasis quite wrong in their housing policy? They have not given enough powers to local government, they have not regulated the system enough and they have allowed exactly the wrong type of landlords to drive a coach and horses through what limited regulation there is. In many ways, that reflects a bigger picture, not only of the poor vulnerable people who are being mistreated, but of a lack of emphasis on council housing and a lack of regulation of private rented accommodation. The whole system needs a complete rethink and Ministers need to listen to what my hon. Friend is saying.

Shabana Mahmood: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend that we need a system-wide approach. Local authorities need the power to reject applications for exempt accommodation on the grounds of saturation or oversupply. We must break the habit of putting huge amounts of need into already stretched areas and then wondering why those areas can never recover. We wonder why people who have raised their families and committed themselves to stable communities in modest properties that they are proud of, whether they are socially renting or have managed to become owner-occupiers, are so desperate to leave the areas that they were committed to, when we have loaded all sorts of high need into those areas and provided none of the services to support them.

People dumping has to stop, over-saturation has to stop and local authorities need the power to prevent an over-saturation of supply. We need community impact assessments before we get large numbers of

exempt supported accommodation across our different communities, to ensure we are not loading more need into already difficult areas.

As I said earlier, the vast majority of tenants in exempt accommodation should be able to demonstrate some sort of local link to the area. Unless it is a requirement because of a prison or domestic violence-related issue, most people need some such link in order to have the stability to turn their lives around.

Finally, we need an inspections regime. We need to keep providers on their toes so that it is not the case that once someone has accessed the system, nobody will ever ask them questions again. There should be at least an annual check to ensure that people who have access to vulnerable tenants and taxpayer cash are doing the thing they said they would do and fulfilling the promises they made.

Only with Government action can we turn the dial on a huge problem that affects not only my constituency, but people all across this country. Our communities deserve nothing less. When the Minister stands to close this debate, I hope he will not simply say, "We're watching, and we're waiting and seeing, and we're going to think about what we're going to do," but give us a legislative timetable for making the changes that are needed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): If everybody takes 13 or 14 minutes, we will not get everybody in. If people could be mindful of their colleagues, we will try to squeeze everybody in.

5.48 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I wanted to start with a small tribute. In the weeks before he died, exempt accommodation was one of the last campaigns I was working on with my dear friend the then Member for Birmingham, Erdington, the late Jack Dromey. Parts of Stockland Green in his constituency had been saturated with HMO-style exempt conversions and caused serious issues with crime and community unrest.

Jack spent his career fighting to improve the lives of his constituents in Erdington. Sorting out the scandal of exempt accommodation was the kind of campaign he lived and breathed. That is why, working with his local inspector, he was able to get an extra 24 officers deployed to Stockland Green to address the antisocial behaviour and crime associated with some of this transient accommodation. All of us have lost a great champion with his passing, but for his sake and for the people of Erdington it is important that we fix this issue once and for all.

Birmingham has the most units of non-commissioned exempt accommodation in the country, with some 20,000 units and more than 4,000 properties registered as exempt. As we have heard, safety and quality concerns are widespread. Several of my city's largest providers have been issued regulatory notices by the Regulator of Social Housing for finance and governance issues. Hundreds of exempt properties in our city have been found to be unsafe. For this, literally millions of pounds of taxpayers' money is being shovelled to the operators of these properties without apparent due diligence or scrutiny.

[Preet Kaur Gill]

Over the past few years, I have worked closely with providers, residents, the police, the sector and community groups to get to the bottom of why this sector has doubled in our city in just a few years and why so much of this accommodation is substandard and badly managed. I have had first-hand experience of dealing with this myself in the case of Saif Lodge in my constituency. I had been aware of some of the issues at Saif Lodge for some time since I was elected, but after my constituents alerted me to the shocking rise in crime surrounding this property, I carried out a spot check to see for myself what was going on. I was shocked by what I found—25 men and women, including ex-offenders, housed with severe issues ranging from addiction and substance misuse to mental health problems.

Just one solitary support worker was on duty, who told me that the hostel was manned only on weekdays, with residents otherwise left to their own devices. The conditions were utterly substandard—cold, filthy and cramped. The downstairs toilet had broken and flooded and been left unfixed. The smell was hair-raising. Access to the property was via a code that was regularly shared with strangers who were always in and out of the property. Communal spaces were in a horrible state. No wonder residents were frequently found spilling out and loitering outside. This was not a place where any of us could happily live, let alone get a life back on track following a crisis.

I commend my local community, especially the residents on Fountain Road; Birmingham City Council; its leader, Ian Ward; and West Midlands police, including my local Inspector Lee Trinder and Sergeant Bushra Zarif. They have been absolutely brilliant in working with me on this campaign. Jane Haynes from Birmingham Live has been diligent in raising awareness of this issue for many years. Over many months, we were able to gather the evidence we needed to take the case to court, and finally, last year, we succeeded in shutting Saif Lodge down—the first order of its kind in the country. That was a great achievement, but there can be no doubt that this is not evidence of a system that is working. The resources from police and ambulance call-outs, and the misery inflicted on residents and the community alike, have been immense. We cannot shut down every Saif Lodge—there are far too many. Shutting down Saif Lodge did not stop the same people setting up another exempt property in another constituency down the road. Actually, it was in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood), who made such a passionate speech.

That brings me to the need for reform. Bad landlords are exploiting this system for a profit while our communities and vulnerable people pay the price. I say to the Government today: care cannot be provided on the cheap. Last year Birmingham City Council inspected over 400 exempt properties, in which they found over 1,000 category 1 hazards that posed

“a serious and immediate risk to a person’s health and safety”.

As part of these inspections, the council found a further 600 category 2 hazards, which include fire safety issues, asbestos, and excessive heat or cold. This is from just a fraction of our stock in Birmingham.

Of the 21,317 exempt accommodation properties identified by Birmingham City Council as part of its investigation, about 20,000 are not commissioned by the local authority. Landlords who apply for registered provider status seek referrals for vulnerable people beyond the city’s boundaries, bringing people with support needs to Birmingham where they are remote from their natural support networks. The truth is that too many bad landlords are getting into this sector for precisely the wrong reasons. They are exploiting a toxic cocktail of under-regulation, a Conservative housing crisis, and an epidemic of unmet need after years of council cuts. There are good providers, even brilliant ones, operating in Birmingham who are trying to do the right thing, but, as we have heard, there is a growing underbelly too.

The definition of what support residents receive in exchange for higher rents is far too vague and open to exploitation. In fact, there is no statutory definition at all. The ambit of the Regulator of Social Housing is too narrow and too passive to pick up the exploiters, its “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy to look only at providers with more than 1,000 units of exempt property has become a loophole for exploiters, and our local authorities do not have the powers or resources to crack down on antisocial behaviour and the oversupply of exempt accommodation in certain areas. I have talked to the campaign groups working on this in our city and heard that whole roads of family homes are being converted into HMOs to cash in on the higher levels of rent that these properties can yield. People are gaming the system and making money off the backs of vulnerable people, and this Government have put off the job of reform for too long. Exempt accommodation cannot mean “exempt from responsibility”. That is why it is important to note that there is no statutory definition of what care, support or supervision is in the context of exempt accommodation. Landlords are getting away with providing either nothing or variable ad hoc support to those who need it most.

Since previously mooted reforms of the supported housing system were shelved in 2018, the exempt accommodation sector has grown by 62% across the UK. The sector is now worth more than a billion pounds, yet in November, at an all-party parliamentary group for ending homelessness event, the Minister’s team said that they were too “light on data” to get on with reform. In recent years, we have had reports from Prospect Housing and Spring Housing and policy recommendations from Crisis, Commonweal Housing and Birmingham City Council. In 2017, the independent chair of the Birmingham safeguarding adults board commissioned a study into the experiences of vulnerable adults living within exempt accommodation. The findings highlighted issues relating to poor quality of accommodation and variable experiences of the quality of support provided and risk management processes. In 2019, a report commissioned by Commonweal Housing set out the issues clearly, concluding that the non-commissioned exempt sub-sector

“embodies a range of social injustices; the most salient of which are the risk of social harm, absence of user voice and barriers to employment and social integration.”

Several pilots and reports from multiple community groups are all pointing in the same direction, yet the Government have failed to publish their findings from the pilots or even to act on the recommendations. Lives are literally at stake here. Survivors of domestic violence,

prison leavers, care leavers and people with mental health and substance abuse issues deserve a supported housing system that supports their transition to happier, more independent lives. Our communities in Birmingham deserve neighbourhoods that are peaceful and safe, not a magnet for crime. The taxpayer deserves to know that their money is going to support people who need it, not lining the pockets of criminals.

Enough is enough. We need a statutory definition of care, support and supervision, and resources for local authorities to fund inspection programmes for exempt accommodation in their region. We need to ensure individuals and families housed in exempt accommodation have a link to the area they are placed. We need to give local authorities and the social housing regulator greater enforcement powers and to strengthen the vetting process. Birmingham has called for the Government to align the existing planning and HMO licensing policies to capture supported housing provision that is currently exempt and to give local authorities powers to reject applications in a specific area on the grounds of oversupply. Our communities want action now.

5.57 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), who represents the constituency I grew up in. More importantly, she made such a powerful point to illustrate the importance of this debate. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), who is temporarily not in her place, for bringing this debate about, and the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), who is also not here at the moment, for his response. I listened to him carefully. He certainly understands the issues, because of his former roles at Birmingham YMCA and in the housing movement before he entered this House, but we need more than his understanding and his pilots.

MPs have raised so many examples of the poor standards, the poor support and the lack of regulation faced by too many tenants living in exempt accommodation or supported housing across the country. We must not forget that almost all those living in exempt accommodation are the most vulnerable and the most in need of care and support, almost by definition. They include those with mental health needs, those recovering from serious addiction, those fleeing domestic abuse, those leaving prison or the care system and those with other vulnerabilities. What they have in common is that they need and deserve to get their lives back on track and to move on, but for many, the abuses of exempt accommodation prevent that from happening.

There are many good examples of supported housing and exempt accommodation, such as Look Ahead, which provides housing and support for 18 to 25-year-olds with complex needs in my constituency. When I visited last autumn, the residents told me about the help they were getting from Look Ahead staff with their benefits, with getting on courses and into work, with having meaningful activities to occupy them when they were not able to study or work, with support with parenting and with the other basics of day-to-day life that these young people are not able to get from their parents for a variety of reasons. Look Ahead, like other charities and

community interest companies, is set up to support vulnerable people, as well as to provide a roof over their heads, and not to make a profit. Staff told me that cuts to funding and universal credit mean that they struggle to provide the level and quality of support that they are set up to offer and want to be able to provide for these youngsters.

There are also rogue landlords, however, who exploit the system permitted by the exempt housing benefit provisions. They are making obscene profits at the taxpayers' expense and then costing taxpayers more in the long run through the price of neglect of those vulnerable people. We have heard many examples in the debate.

Not all exempt accommodation has been exported from London. I am aware of several such houses in my west London constituency. A constituent with mental health problems was placed in a run-down house with no support for his needs and was living in fear of another resident with aggressive and violent behaviour. Constituents living near such supported accommodation have been affected by antisocial behaviour and racist, sexist and homophobic abuse from the residents. Those residents have no meaningful activities to keep them occupied or sanctions on their actions, as they would if the supported accommodation was properly run.

This is yet another example of the wider trend that we have seen under the Government of the most vulnerable people in society being a mere afterthought. The sweeping cuts to local authorities such as Hounslow, which has lost £150 million in grant funding since 2010, have had an impact. Funding for social housing nationally has seen huge cuts, as has already been raised today. Support services have been shredded before our eyes.

The safety nets provided by local authorities, Government agencies and the always-valuable third sector have fallen away. The cumulative effect of those cuts has had an impact that hits the most vulnerable hardest—including those living in exempt accommodation owned by rogue landlords. We are talking about people who are vulnerable now, some of whom are a risk to themselves or perhaps those around them. Most want to move on with their lives, but the support that they need to do that is no longer there.

Exempt accommodation appears to exist in a vacuum largely outside regulations or the control and influence of local authorities. We have the Care Quality Commission to regulate the quality of care in our health and care settings, and the prisons inspectorate for those in custody, but nothing to ensure that such landlords are providing the care and support that the residents badly need. The limited powers that councils have to regulate HMOs do not apply to exempt accommodation and the schemes that we have heard about from the Minister are merely discretionary.

My hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), who is no longer in her place, reminded us of Supporting People, which was a good model of providing support for people in need. It was introduced by the Labour Government and ended by the Conservative Government. Now, 11 years later, the Government must act, and soon. We need stronger regulations, not just discretionary standards. We need a social housing regulator with powers to deal with rogue landlords who are not only ripping off the taxpayer but putting the most vulnerable people in society at risk.

[Ruth Cadbury]

We need providers to pass a fit and proper persons test before they are allowed to provide exempt accommodation. We need a stronger inspections regime to keep providers on their toes and a regulator that has full powers of enforcement to clamp down on those who still flout the system. That is the least that the vulnerable residents of exempt accommodation and their neighbours deserve. When I intervened on the Minister, he conceded that he would not shy away from further regulation if a case was made, and I hope that he does not shy away from it.

6.3 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): We are here because, as other hon. Members have said, we have seen a rise in unscrupulous landlords taking advantage of registration loopholes for exempt housing. In many cases, exempt housing is designed to give refuge to some of the most vulnerable people in our society, such as rough sleepers, refugees and those facing domestic abuse. It should maintain a strong focus on the care, support and supervision of its inhabitants.

Exempt housing certainly has a legitimate and well-intentioned use, but the intentions do not match the reality. Due to a lack of oversight, unscrupulous landlords are buying up large swathes of housing in densely packed neighbourhoods. They claim that they are establishing exempt housing so that they can charge and pocket extortionate levels of rents while providing minimal levels of support for their vulnerable inhabitants, and we have heard numerous examples today of how landlords have done that. These landlords are incentivised because flawed housing benefit provisions allow landlords to receive higher rents than what is the norm for social and privately rented housing in a given neighbourhood. These landlords have been able to take advantage of this system because there is far too little oversight or regulating of who qualifies for it.

I know that my neighbours in the west midlands are certainly suffering the consequences of this massive and disgraceful loophole. For example, in Birmingham some landlords were charging as much as £200 per week, despite the cap for shared accommodation being placed at just £57. This is completely appalling. While landlords are lining their pockets, vulnerable claimants are not receiving the care they so desperately need, and many are forced to live in inhumane conditions, which certainly has a wider knock-on impact on community cohesion and safety.

Department for Work and Pensions data shows that the exploitation of this loophole has been growing. In fact, exempt tenancies grew by 62% between 2016 and 2019 alone. I know that my neighbours in Birmingham have had to bear the highest brunt of this increase. I was in Birmingham, Erdington earlier this week, and from talking to so many residents I know that they are just completely fed up with this. They really want this mess to be cleared up as quickly as possible because they have just had enough.

We urgently need action to stop landlords from taking advantage of the exempt housing system, and I really urge the Minister to take immediate steps to root out this corrupt practice in the west midlands and in the rest of the country too. I also ask the Minister to speak to his counterpart in the DWP to institute a proper legal

test for access to enhanced housing benefits from the DWP. What we really need is to enshrine a proper checklist of what counts as care, support or supervision in law.

Finally, from what we have heard from so many speakers, we know that urgent action is really needed, and I ask the Government to step up and take action as soon as possible because so many people are suffering from this.

6.7 pm

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I am privileged to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi).

Before I start, I want, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) did, to pay tribute to Jack Dromey, the Member of Parliament for Birmingham, Erdington. He fused us all together on this issue because of the huge concern that exists, to the extent that a Sky News broadcast was based in his constituency. It was about the appalling way in which his constituents were treated, with single parents—single mothers—living in atrocious conditions, and all sorts of fly-tipping taking place, essentially making the whole place look like a tip. He was very vigilant in fighting against that, and I certainly hope that Councillor Hamilton, who will replace him after 3 March, will continue that fight along with us.

The leading housing organisations Commonweal Housing, the National Housing Federation, Crisis, Women's Aid and Housing Justice have all expressed serious concern on this issue, and they are quite right to do so because the people they serve are the most vulnerable people in our community and society. These people are being abused—physically and mentally tortured—in the places they have been put, putting a huge burden on them. People who initially sought refuge because of the abuse they suffered have been further abused, as have those who are under strain because of their own condition.

I have a constituent with seven children, one of whom is very severely disabled, and the only thing that could be done was to put them temporarily in a hotel that is not fit for habitation. They were put in two rooms—one room for her children down the corridor and one room for her—but in the end she had to put them all together because, quite rightly, she did not want to leave her children on their own.

One of my constituents has people coming on prison release next door to her, and her life has been turned completely upside down. When she came to see me at the surgery, one would not believe that she was living in her own property with a reasonable job, but she has suffered a huge amount of torture from the antisocial behaviour going on there. The manifestation that has taken place is predominantly in the non-commissioned exempt housing sector, which feels that it is totally lawless. People feel that they can do whatever they want, and they tend to do what they want. They know that they will not be stopped from making millions of pounds on the back of our poorest people, and that should not be allowed to take place.

We should provide secure accommodation for those who need it. As has been said, we have no inspection regime. That is a huge problem because the sector is taking money from the Department for Work and Pensions,

and for social care for which it is not providing a service. That is stealing money from the taxpayer—that is what is happening—but people know they will get away with it, because nobody is there to chase them up and see what is going on, or look at how to deal with it. Those issues are hugely important.

There is a huge issue about article 4 directions. In my constituency I have essentially lost a community environment because there are so many cases of exempt housing being taken over. People have moved out, and unscrupulous people have bought up those properties. That has led to a huge amount of antisocial behaviour, to the extent that on Oxhill Road in my constituency, a huge brawl blocked the road and the traffic on it. The brawl damaged people's property in the surrounding area, and people were attacked in different houses, leading to a huge fight on the street. That could have had a huge effect on anybody who was driving past and trying to get through without knowing what was going on. There could have been very serious incidents.

The one big issue on which I wish to concentrate is the amount of money laundering, and the use of money from drugs and the proceeds of crime that has entered the sector. The pilot scheme in Birmingham acknowledged that that was taking place, which is a very serious charge. Not only are people exploiting and taking money from us, but they are then cleaning up money that is ill-gotten and from criminal proceedings. We should not allow that to happen. We must work with local authorities, and with the people who matter and the communities that want to make a difference. We must deal with this issue.

I know the Minister, and I have met him both socially and professionally. We have a good relationship, we have good friends in common, and we work together on this issue. I know he is a decent man and that he believes in this. I know that when he says he wants to support some of those good landlords with good practices, he is right to do so, but at the same time we must not drop the ball, because there are unscrupulous people holding the entire exempt housing sector hostage through their work. I urge the Minister, as soon as possible, to consider how we can regulate this industry and move forward, and ensure that those who are vulnerable have some dignity brought back to their lives. We are the people who are supposed to be looking after their interests, but at the moment we are not doing so.

6.14 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood). I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood), who made a tour-de-force contribution to the debate. The Minister could not do better than getting her into the Department and taking some of her sage advice. It is reassuring to hear us debating exempt accommodation in the House of Commons, because in recent weeks I have visited constituents of mine who are neighbours of some of the rogue providers. It is a dominating issue, because it is about vulnerable people, often with significant challenges, and they are losing out in all of this. Exempt accommodation should be a vital function, helping the most marginalised and vulnerable groups in society, but instead all too often it seems to be making up for the chronic shortages of affordable social housing.

We see social housing now at its lowest rate in decades, and there is an annual net loss of 24,000 social homes. One outcome is that we are now over-reliant on exempt accommodation, often at extortionate costs. Supported housing commands far higher rents, which is one of the reasons why it is not under the housing benefit cap. Landlords can demand higher rents than for social or privately rented housing. Of course, there could be a legitimate reason for that, and there are good providers delivering quality services, but let us be under no illusions: unscrupulous agencies are exploiting the enormous gaps in the regulatory regime to rake in higher rents while providing minimal support and, as is too often the case, substandard housing.

In theory, transitional forms of supported housing should be a bridge to independent living. They should be a way for vulnerable people to have a safe place that they can call home where they receive the support that they need to regain their independence. There are shining examples. Damien John Kelly House in Picton in Liverpool—a home for men in recovery from addiction—is one such place. It is a fantastic community that supports, inspires and allows for transformational change. The difference between substandard housing and a good provider is that the good provider offers a community and support work, including support for mental health, while a bad provider might only give someone a key for a cupboard in a shared kitchen and an extra lock on their door. The difference is so significant, and it either makes or ruins people's lives.

People in my constituency have written to me for help. They live in what they thought was supported housing only to realise that the support package they were promised does not exist and might consist of as little as a CCTV camera in the hallway. The reality of the supported housing racket is vulnerable residents with complex needs living in squalor, isolated, without access to local services, sharing a house with residents who all require specialist support. What is bad for those people living in the properties can quickly escalate to blight the lives of their neighbours and the local community. That experience is all too familiar for my constituents in Anfield and Walton and those further afield.

While vulnerable residents and the community around them suffer, rogue landlords and agencies collect rents from the taxpayer far in excess of allowance rates and without proper regulation. They game the system easily and without consequence. It is a lucrative enterprise for some, operated and funded by the state, and it is almost completely unaccountable. Liverpool has seen a recent influx of these properties, because we have many larger properties that are ripe for conversion to HMOs or exempt accommodation. They are targeted by investment companies from far and wide who buy up cheaper properties in the most deprived areas and lease them to umbrella management companies who moonlight as supported housing providers. The result is that rents are set artificially high to maximise the yield for investors. The net cost to Liverpool after receipt of Government subsidy has risen year on year, to £4 million in 2020. As profits for landlords increase, so do reports of poorly managed, unsafe accommodation that provides threadbare support.

There are so many loopholes that allow for that profiteering. Registered providers are not even subject to the most basic licensing requirements that HMOs

[Dan Carden]

must legally comply with. That must be unjustifiable. In 2020, the Government introduced the national statement of expectations for supported housing, so they have tried to deal with this problem fairly recently. The statement sets out standards for the accommodation element of supported housing. However, it is a reference tool—a polite suggestion at best. It must be developed, toughened up and put on a statutory footing. The standards must be legally enforceable. The statement does not even include minimum quality standards for the support, care and supervision that these companies are being paid inflated rents to deliver. It is so poorly defined that an extra lock on a door would pass the test every time. Local authorities could be given the powers to regulate the sector, but that must go hand-in-hand with proper funding and support.

Finally, I see providing a decent home for every person as the most important challenge facing our country. The public pays in the region of £20 billion each year in housing support—money that more often than not lines the pockets of property investment companies and landlords. The reason we are not building decent homes for all has nothing to do with constraints on public spending. It is a free-for-all when public spending lines the pockets of profiteers—we see it time and again. It is this Government's choice not to invest public money in public provision and that is unjustifiable. It would cost the Government half of what they pay in housing support each year to return us to the spending levels on housebuilding of the post-war Governments of the 1940s and 1950s who strived to make this a country that works for all its citizens, and from which we have today diverted so far away.

6.21 pm

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): I would like to begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) for her excellent contribution and for securing the Westminster Hall debate a few weeks ago, and by noting the work done by the late Jack Dromey, the former Member for Birmingham, Erdington, on the issue of exempt accommodation in Birmingham.

As the Minister is no doubt aware, Birmingham has seen the largest increase in exempt accommodation outside London, with housing benefits claimants linked to the sector increasing to around 21,000. Birmingham City Council has done a great deal of work investigating and attempting to tackle this issue, but an overall lack of regulation from the Government is creating a massive influx of exempt accommodation in Birmingham, for the reasons set out by previous speakers.

Exempt accommodation often appears in residential areas without any community consultation. Neighbours wake up to find exempt accommodation established in their street and before long reports of anti-social behaviour, drugs, prostitution, exploitation and other serious issues emerge. I have been approached by many constituents across Birmingham Hall Green who are concerned with the significant increase in this type of accommodation in their local areas. Some residents have even reported being threatened with physical violence by tenants of exempt accommodation. That is why I applaud the efforts of local campaigners, councillors and parliamentary colleagues from across Birmingham who have worked

so hard to secure an inquiry into exempt accommodation, which is now being undertaken by the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee. I sincerely hope that the Government take note and pay close attention to that inquiry. It is evident that certain landlords are taking advantage of the current system to set up housing without providing any support to tenants, security for neighbours, or accountability for the social issues which may arise.

The serious reform of exempt accommodation is therefore necessary, with increased regulation across the sector. A fundamental part of that change must be to establish meaningful community consultation on this issue, so that residents are no longer ignored about what happens on the streets in their neighbourhoods. Those residents suffer the brunt of the problems associated with exempt accommodation, so they should have the greatest say in whether exempt properties should be established in their neighbourhoods. Residents need to be heard. Their views must be taken into consideration and more regulation is needed.

Furthermore, we need to see tougher regulation of exempt accommodation by a social housing regulator that can perform a fit and proper person test, and give local authorities the power to reject exempt accommodation in specific areas because of over-saturation.

6.25 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I will declare an interest—I believe that the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) has already declared a similar interest. I used to be a provider of exempt accommodation, much like him. My brother also lived in exempt accommodation in Birmingham—this seems a very Birmingham issue—as well as in some Conservative constituencies, including, I think, Weston-super-Mare and Blackpool. We traffic vulnerable people around this country to places where there is somewhere available for them to go, far away from their families and people they may need.

My brother's experience is of being a recovering drug addict and alcoholic. He was actually the first person who alerted me to the problems in exempt accommodation. He saw things such as women being pimped out from the accommodation that he stayed in, women who were substance-misuse dependent, and the use of some of the people living in the accommodation to run drugs around. That is now, I realise, not just what happened in my brother's account, because I see it every single day in the constituency that I represent.

It was unacceptable for my brother to be shifted around the country, but we do that all the time. A bloke recently got in touch with me and asked whether I would give my backing as a Birmingham MP with an expertise in providing supported accommodation to what was basically a Tinder-style app, so that vulnerable people from around the country could be matched up with a local authority of their choosing. I expressed to him that that would be trafficking and that I would rather die than help him do that.

The reality is that I know what it is to provide supported accommodation, because I have done it, and I know that the Minister knows it, too. I have worked in refuges that were entirely funded by advanced housing benefit, and I am not just talking about commissioned

services. Obviously, I worked for a provider that had lots of commissioned services. I saw the level of detail that a provider has to go through to get a commissioned service. If it wants to be the locally commissioned domestic abuse service or the locally commissioned substance misuse service, it will probably have to go through an eight-month process. I literally had to get down to the minutiae of the detail of exactly which sort of thumb-turn screw I would have to use to make sure that it was completely acceptable. I had to have safety planning put in place with the police in case people's perpetrators turned up. I had to sit on the children's safeguarding board. I had to take part in lots of statutory requirements, such as domestic homicide reviews. We had to sit on the multi-agency risk assessment conference for both children and adults. That is the level of detail that is gone into to become a commissioned service, but guess what: you can call yourself a refuge and just apply for advanced housing benefit and you will get exactly the same funding as really decent providers.

I stand here as a representative of decent providers and with the backing of Women's Aid, which has sent briefings around to all of us today, to say: "Do not think for one second that regulating this is going to push decent providers out." I would gladly have taken a fit and proper person test. I would gladly have been investigated every single year and had somebody come and look round one of my refuges—without question.

As well as having run commissioned services, I was also a commissioner on Birmingham City Council for a spell. I think our budget for commissioning domestic abuse accommodation services was about £4 million. The amount currently being spent in Birmingham on exempt accommodation is £100 million! That would be manna from heaven to decent organisations. I tell you what: the Government just need to give me half that—not even half; a quarter—and I will commission brilliant providers who will not bed-block people because they are a nice little earner, and who will not be washing their dirty money and failing to look after people in their accommodation.

If Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid, St Basils in Birmingham, local refugee provision services or the brilliant substance misuse service in my constituency, which was actually the one that saved my brother's life, had even a quarter of the money that we are currently giving to dodgy landlords, they could provide a service for everyone.

I went on a ride-along with the police. The day we give to policing is my favourite day of the year—honestly, I am going to be a copper when I give this up. Maybe I will be the Met commissioner. Every single call-out that I went on with West Midlands police that day was to exempt accommodation. Because I am much more expert in it than the police, it got to the point where they just sat in the car and I went in, because I am a properly trained support worker who knows how to work with people who are very vulnerable and calm down the situation. When I said, "Where's your support worker?", they said, "I don't know, I haven't seen him for a while." One of the people had paranoid schizophrenia. The lad who eventually turned up was about 19 years old, bless him. A fracas had broken out between the residents, so I said, "Can I please see what medication he is on?" He went to a cupboard in the kitchen and opened it up in front of me. He was like, "I don't know which one's

his—I can't find the medication—I'm not sure." That is cracking medicines management! It would never have happened in a refuge that I ran.

Think of the cost to West Midlands police, who are currently providing the state service of security. I never needed to call out the police to any refuge that I ran, because I had proper support plans in place, and I am sure the Minister would say the same about those that he ran. We are probably talking about another 20 million quid—and every time the police are called out to this crappy accommodation, they cannot go out to domestic abuse calls or have specialist training on sexual violence. It is such a cost.

As for the level of scrutiny in order to get that money, disabled constituents in Birmingham, Yardley face a more rigorous test to get funding from the Department for Work and Pensions than any of the landlords operating in my constituency. The landlords never even sit in front of anybody, yet my constituents have to prove whether they can undo their buttons or walk as far as the centre. Vulnerable people in my constituency are literally put through more rigour by the Department for Work and Pensions than people who are taking tens of millions of pounds off the taxpayer. As a taxpayer, I do not want to pay for it any more. I am not going to sit by and see my hard-earned taxes funding things that are harming my constituents. The Government quite simply have to step in.

That is before I even start on the dreadful cases of violence against women and girls that are going on in these environments. About nine months ago, I wrote to the Secretary of State for "levelling up" about a case in my constituency, which I will keep on raising, of a 19-year-old rape victim living with people who are perpetrators of violence against women. She locks herself in her room every night. She is frightened to live there, and that is where she has been placed.

I know that the Minister has daughters. He would not for one second allow his daughter to live as my constituent is living—I know he would not, ever. I would never let one of my children live in these places, ever, so I have to fight for everybody's children not to have to live in them. What is happening is totally unacceptable.

I have been told that we do not have the parliamentary time to act. The Secretary of State has not even written back to me about the case. I was told, "We do not have the parliamentary time", weeks before we went into the conference recess to drink warm wine in crappy meeting rooms. My reaction was "Bring us back! This matters!" I like the Labour party conference—I was pinged, although I can't say I was that upset—but I would rather be here, sorting out the lives of my constituents. We can act now. There is time; there is plenty of time. The Labour party will work with the Government to facilitate that time, to make sure that this can happen. It should happen now, because we are funding dreadful behaviour.

I will end with a story about the former Sheldon police station, in my constituency. There was a proposal to convert it into exempt accommodation. I was sent a request for support, which said, "We are going to house domestic violence victims alongside people with substance misuse and people who are coming out of prison"—to which I obviously replied, "No, you're not." The local people all said, "No, you're not." The local council said, "No, you're not." When the planning application reached those in the Department of the Ministers who are

[*Jess Phillips*]

sitting opposite me, what did they say? Even though the application had been turned down every single time in the local area, they overruled us, and allowed it to pass.

If Ministers are not willing to stop this on an individual basis, I beg of them: make the regulation exactly as it has been called for by the Labour party, and do it today.

6.36 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to follow that powerful speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (*Jess Phillips*).

This has been an excellent debate, featuring a great many thoughtful and impassioned contributions, and I thank all the Members who have taken part in it. As would be expected, there have been points of contention throughout, but there is clearly agreement across the House that far too many people find themselves living in unsafe, poor-quality shared housing without the support that they need to get back on their feet and improve their lives, and that the beneficiaries of this arrangement are the unscrupulous providers who, by exploiting gaps in the existing regulatory regime, have extracted—and continue to extract—significant amounts of public money through the “exempt” provisions relating to housing benefit.

As we have heard today from Members in all parts of the House, those who are suffering so that rogue landlords of this kind can get rich are some of the most vulnerable people in our society: those fleeing domestic abuse, those who have served their time in prison and are trying to make a fresh start, those with severe mental health needs, those battling addiction and substance dependence, those leaving care, and those who have sought and secured asylum in our country and are starting the process of building a new life for themselves. The impact of poor-quality, non-commissioned exempt accommodation on vulnerable individuals like those can be devastating, whether it is the physical and mental consequences of living in squalid conditions, the risks that arise from the absence of effective supervision and safeguarding arrangements, the money gouged from hard-up residents through service charge costs that are ineligible for housing benefit purposes, or simply the inability to sustain an exempt accommodation tenancy, or to move on from one, because of a lack of care or support.

Sharp practice in this sector is causing real harm, and, as we have heard today, it is not only causing harm to the vulnerable individuals placed in this type of housing. Communities with large numbers of badly run exempt-accommodation properties are struggling to cope with the impact of concentrated numbers of people whose lives are, by definition, challenging and often chaotic, and who are not being given the supervision, care and support that they need in order to manage. Most galling, it is taxpayers who are subsidising this exploitative arrangement, and are thereby indirectly facilitating its social consequences. This is a situation that cries out for urgent reform, and the motion therefore seeks to ensure that the Government end the exploitation of vulnerable individuals at the hands of unscrupulous agencies, and at the taxpayer’s expense, as a matter of urgency.

I want to respond to a number of the points that have been raised in the debate, and to explain why we believe that a package of emergency measures is required to end this profiteering. Today we have heard numerous accounts of the detrimental impact of poorly managed, poor-quality non-commissioned exempt accommodation across the country. That attests to the scale of the problem, and to the fact that it is not an issue that affects only some cities and towns or only a select number of local authority areas. It is obvious that some parts of the country are more badly affected than others, and we have heard how and why cities such as Birmingham have become hotspots for poor practice in this sector, but it is a problem affecting every corner of the UK. Given the steady increase in the number of exempt tenancies over recent years, it is likely to become more widespread and more acute in the years to come if the Government fail to act quickly to stop rogue providers gaming the system.

Today’s debate has also made it clear that this is a complex problem to which there is no simple single solution, and the necessary first step to addressing it is that the Government accept that it cannot be tackled simply by incremental improvements at local level. Local discretion is of course vital, and there is no doubt that individual local authorities have been able, by their own efforts, through measures such as enhanced scrutiny of benefit claims or the use of voluntary codes of conduct, to reduce their reliance on the exempt accommodation sector and to drive up standards within it.

However, leaving this problem purely to councils, even with additional support, is not a solution, because it fails to address the fundamental causes of the problem. It is akin to asking the passengers of a ship holed beneath the waterline to do their best to bale the rising water out with their hands rather than seeking to repair the damage at source. Because it does not address the fundamental causes, any progress made in one local area will inevitably mean rogue providers simply pick up sticks and move to prey on another. If the Government are truly committed to bearing down on this problem wherever it arises, it must be a question of how, not if, they should intervene at national level to support the efforts already being undertaken by individual local authorities across the country.

We know what underlying factors have combined to drive the marked growth of this sector under successive Conservative-led Governments: a chronic shortage of genuinely affordable housing; reductions in funding for housing-related support; and new barriers to access for single adults requiring social rented or mainstream privately rented housing. If we are to stand any chance of reducing reliance on non-commissioned exempt accommodation over the long term, the Government must take meaningful action in those areas.

However, those individuals and communities that are already suffering at the hands of unscrupulous exempt accommodation providers do not have the luxury of time. They cannot wait for patient reform over many years to reduce overall dependence on the sector and limit the opportunities for rogue operators to take advantage of it. They cannot wait for the Government to get around to analysing the results of local pilots that finished long ago. They require Ministers to act now—in a considered way, yes, but at pace. I have to say that the lackadaisical tone adopted by the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling

Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), in his response suggested that the Government had not yet properly taken this on board.

We must act at pace, and that is why the motion specifically calls for a package of emergency measures to bring an immediate end to sharp practice in the sector. There are two obvious ways in which the Government could act swiftly and decisively to achieve that outcome. The first is to introduce some form of licensing regime, including fit and proper person requirements for providers of exempt accommodation. Ultimately, it is the exempt provisions of housing benefit that enable and encourage rogue providers to enter the sector and exploit vulnerable individuals at the taxpayer's expense. There is therefore an overwhelming case for better regulating the eligibility for, and therefore access to, exempt benefit claims, to ensure that high-quality supported housing providers are the norm. Just as care home providers need to register with the Care Quality Commission and be subject to regular inspection, an effective licensing regime would see exempt accommodation landlords screened and monitored so that new unscrupulous providers were denied access to the system and the existing ones were progressively weeded out.

The second change would be to introduce a robust framework of national standards for the sector while ensuring that councils had access to the resources necessary to tailor that framework to local circumstances and enforce standards on the ground. At present, what qualifies as the more-than-minimal care, support or supervision to be provided by an exempt accommodation landlord is incredibly vague. As a result, local authorities are unable to judge effectively whether claims are valid and eligible. The reforms proposed in the social housing White Paper should make a difference to exempt homes that fall within that category, and we urge the Government to bring forward the legislation to enact them as soon as possible. Even if those proposals lead to an improvement, however, they do not cover all kinds of exempt housing, as the Minister well knows. Anyone who examines how rogue exempted accommodation providers are taking advantage of existing regulatory loopholes cannot but conclude that we need a new regulatory regime to drive up standards for supported housing across the board and to give all local authorities the tools they would need to make the regime work in their area.

These are only the two most obvious changes that are needed if we are to begin effectively bearing down on the problem that the House has debated today. Many other smaller changes are required to bring this scandal to an end. The motion deliberately avoids setting out an extensive shopping list of specific proposals, leaving it open to this House to debate at greater length, on another occasion, precisely what would be included in the kind of emergency package that the motion calls for in principle.

What is important today is that Ministers accept that the current state of affairs must be brought to an end, that what is required is for this House to enact urgent and fundamental reform at a national level, and that they must commit to bringing forward an emergency package of measures to that end. Anything less is tantamount to accepting that some of the most vulnerable people in our society are not worthy of immediate

protection, that unscrupulous operators can continue to exploit them for financial gain and that taxpayers will continue to pick up the bill.

6.46 pm

The Minister for Housing (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to take part in this important debate in my new role. I sincerely and genuinely thank all hon. Members on both sides of the House for their frankly powerful contributions.

I know the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), takes this issue very seriously, as hon. Members on both sides of the House have fairly commented. I have seen how passionate he is about this in just the few days that I have been in the Department, and I will do everything I can to support him in his work to tackle this issue.

It is abundantly clear that the problems affecting the supported accommodation sector are having a very real and serious impact on hundreds, if not thousands, of vulnerable individuals in many parts of the country. That, in turn, has knock-on implications for the housing benefit bill, but there is a human cost, too.

Several hon. Members rightly raised the criminality and antisocial behaviour in their constituencies that stems from people not receiving adequate support and the accommodation that they not only need but deserve. The Government and I are unequivocal in stating that everyone in our society deserves to live somewhere decent, safe and secure, which is why my hon. Friend said in his opening remarks that we have been working relentlessly to crack down on rogue accommodation providers who are exploiting exemptions that were designed to benefit the most vulnerable. Importantly, we have also been working hard to support the high-quality supported housing providers who deliver life-changing services to those who need them most.

Many of this afternoon's contributions struck a chord with me, and it was particularly important to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson), who rightly said that this is not just an issue for cities because, as other hon. Members said, it will start spreading out to the rest of the country. She was also right to praise the good providers, as it is important that we recognise there are excellent providers out there and that we give them that support.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) talked about the Government's £12 billion affordable homes programme, and it is right that we build beautiful homes for people, including council homes. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) has been passionate about this subject, and we could just feel from her speech that she has done a tremendous amount of work on it. I know that she will be rightly keeping us at pace on the issues. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) spoke movingly, from a very personal perspective, about the experiences of her own family; those contributions are incredibly valuable for us to hear, as we realise that this is about real people.

First, I would like to take the opportunity to clarify some of the issues raised about the exempt accommodation sector as a whole, because there is a problem with some but by no means all exempt accommodation. The term

[Stuart Andrew]

“supported exempt” is used to define accommodation for housing benefit purposes and covers a wide range of accommodation provided by different providers. So although the term “exempt accommodation” is increasingly synonymous with housing that is of poor quality and poor value for money, we need to be clear that this issue does not apply to all supported exempt providers. More specifically, they should not be tarred with the same brush as the rogue landlords that I, along with many other hon. Members, want out of this system.

Several hon. Members have highlighted examples from their constituencies of accommodation providers gaming the system, claiming for services that they never provide and then walking away with exorbitant amounts of money. Although we know that only a minority of supported housing landlords are behaving in that way, there is clearly evidence that some accommodation providers are exploiting housing benefit rules for their own financial gain. Obviously, that amounts to an egregious abuse of the supported exempt accommodation system, and we have been taking concerted action to stop it. As we heard, the Government have invested more than £5 million in support, which has gone to places such as Birmingham, Blackburn with Darwen, Blackpool, Bristol and Hull, areas that we know have experienced acute difficulties with the local exempt accommodation sector. This funding has been used to crack down on rogue providers, while trialling new and innovative approaches to improve quality and value for money across the board.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I apologise for not having been here for the whole debate, as I have been speaking at a conference on private renting this afternoon. The Minister has just said that we know that only a minority of providers are operating in this unacceptable way. Given that the system is unregulated and the Government do not collect the information, how does he know that it is only a small minority doing this?

Stuart Andrew: I suppose the point I am trying to make is that an awful lot of people out there are doing an enormous amount of work, and although it is important that we highlight where the rogue landlords are, we must not tar everybody with the same brush. There is a danger that schemes could be tarred with being known as inappropriate when we know that some of them, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley said, have turned people’s lives around. I want to see more of that, I really do. I want to see people who are coming out of prison being able to get back into the workplace. I want to see people who have been victims of domestic abuse living in safe accommodation and feeling confident in their lives again. So it is important that we tackle the issue but we do not tar everybody with the same brush.

The other thing I wanted to say was that we are awaiting the final report from the independent evaluators, who are working very hard. I say to the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) that they are working with urgency and at pace so that we can get that fully reviewed as quickly as possible.

Jess Phillips: I just wanted to speak to the point about lots of providers being very good. Those good providers have written to all Members of Parliament about this debate to say that they want to see the exact

regulation that the Labour party has called for today. They are on the side of wanting this regulated, and that is because they are good providers.

Stuart Andrew: I take the point on board entirely.

Several Members have spoken about instances of antisocial behaviour and crime in their constituency that have been directly associated with this sort of accommodation. No one wants to see the proliferation of substandard housing and substandard services bringing down neighbourhoods and, in some cases, even acting as a magnet for antisocial behaviour and criminal behaviour. That is why we are working hand in hand with local authorities to help tackle this issue head on, while championing what we know works and, more importantly, what works well. For example, Hull City Council, one of the five local authorities I mentioned, decided to address the issue by tasking a dedicated antisocial behaviour liaison officer with improving community cohesion by working with landlords and tenants alike.

Other Members mentioned concerns about links to organised crime. It is extremely concerning that criminals may be exploiting vulnerable people and the benefits system. Any such instances must be reported quickly by the appropriate authorities and dealt with swiftly.

Sir George Howarth: Does the Minister accept that this is not just about supported accommodation? Some rogue landlords use the system to recycle the proceeds of crime, and they need cracking down on too.

Stuart Andrew: Absolutely. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary is doing work on the private rented sector, so there is more work to come on that issue.

On rogue domestic abuse provision, I was shocked and appalled to hear the examples of poorly managed, poorly run and poor-quality refuge shelters for women fleeing domestic abuse. It is clear that such places have been anything but shelters from harm. Women fleeing violence have been deliberately misled to believe they will be offered real support and a safe roof over their head. It is not just morally wrong; it is often also illegal. I assure Members that my officials are engaging with councils on all such instances. Through the landmark Domestic Abuse Act 2021, we have given councils new powers and money—£125 million of Government money in 2021-22. That funding is provided specifically to boost the vital support that victims and their children need.

Jess Phillips: I just want to point out that some of that money, which we all fought for and wanted to see—we should bear in mind that it is £125 million for the entire country, when we are currently giving the majority of bad landlords £100 million just for Birmingham, to put that into perspective—will absolutely go into the pockets of exactly the providers we are talking about.

Stuart Andrew: That is exactly why we will tackle this issue. I would love to stand at this Dispatch Box and say, “We’re going to get it done tomorrow”—

Jess Phillips: Go for it!

Stuart Andrew: But the reality is—

Jess Phillips: I’d do it—I’d just make it up!

Stuart Andrew: Well, I am afraid just making it up can sometimes have unintended consequences. Members said that the good providers are ready to go on this; if we do not look at the detail and do it properly, we could introduce real obstacles for some of those good providers. I do not want to do that; I want to get this right, as I know my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary does.

Let me move on to future action. As I have mentioned, we have already invested more than £5 million to support areas that are grappling with poor supported exempt accommodation. The pilots have been independently evaluated, and while we wait for the report the Government continue to work closely with local authorities on the provision of best practice and guidance. I assure Members that we are considering all options available to us, including further regulation. However, as I said, we need to be absolutely sure that any further changes to the rules do not put off responsible providers so much as to throw out the good with the bad. I believe that Members—

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab) *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put.

The House divided: Ayes 142, Noes 0.

Division No. 192]

[6.59 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Efford, Clive
Abrahams, Debbie	Elmore, Chris
Ali, Rushanara	Eshalomi, Florence
Ali, Tahir	Evans, Chris
Amesbury, Mike	Farron, Tim
Anderson, Fleur	Fovargue, Yvonne
Barker, Paula	Foxcroft, Vicky
Begum, Apsana	Foy, Mary Kelly
Benn, rh Hilary	Furniss, Gill
Betts, Mr Clive	Gill, Preet Kaur
Blake, Olivia	Green, Kate
Blomfield, Paul	Green, Sarah
Brennan, Kevin	Greenwood, Lilian
Bryant, Chris	Greenwood, Margaret
Buck, Ms Karen	Gwynne, Andrew
Burton, Richard	Hardy, Emma
Byrne, rh Liam	Harris, Carolyn
Cadbury, Ruth	Hayes, Helen
Carden, Dan	Hillier, Dame Meg
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Hobhouse, Wera
Chamberlain, Wendy	Hopkins, Rachel
Champion, Sarah	Howarth, rh Sir George
Charalambous, Bambos	Huq, Dr Rupa
Clark, Feryal	Hussain, Imran
Cooper, rh Yvette	Jardine, Christine
Creasy, Stella (<i>Proxy vote</i>	Jarvis, Dan
<i>cast by Chris Elmore)</i>	Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Cummins, Judith	Johnson, Kim
Daby, Janet	Jones, rh Mr Kevan
David, Wayne	Jones, Ruth
Davies, Geraint	Jones, Sarah
Davies-Jones, Alex	Kane, Mike
De Cordova, Marsha	Keeley, Barbara
Debonnaire, Thangam	Khan, Afzal
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Lake, Ben
Doughty, Stephen	Lammy, rh Mr David
Dowd, Peter	Lavery, Ian
Eagle, Dame Angela	Leadbeater, Kim
Eagle, Maria	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Edwards, Jonathan	Lewis, Clive

Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Helen
Morgan, Stephen
Murray, James
Nandy, Lisa
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Olney, Sarah
Onwurah, Chi
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Owatemi, Taiwo
Paisley, Ian
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Pollard, Luke
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rees, Christina

Reeves, Ellie
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Stone, Jamie
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Tarry, Sam
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Timms, rh Stephen
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
Wakeford, Christian
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Munira
Winter, Beth
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

Mary Glindon and
Navendu Mishra

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:

Mark Tami and
Gerald Jones

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the significant increase in the numbers of people housed in non-commissioned exempt accommodation under successive Conservative Governments; regrets the opportunities that this increase has provided for unscrupulous operators to exploit vulnerable individuals for financial gain at the taxpayers' expense; recognises that a range of factors have driven the marked growth of this sector including a chronic shortage of genuinely affordable housing, reductions in funding for housing-related support, new barriers to access for single adults requiring social rented housing or mainstream privately rented housing, and a weakening of regulation and oversight; further regrets the detrimental impact that the growth of poor quality non-commissioned exempt accommodation is having on the health and well-being of those vulnerable individuals placed in it and on the public purse; and calls on the Government to introduce a package of emergency measures designed to secure immediate improvements in the quality of non-commissioned exempt accommodation and associated support, to ensure claims for exempt Housing Benefit consistently provide value for money and to drive unscrupulous operators out of the sector.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

SOCIAL SECURITY

That the draft Social Security (Contributions) (Rates, Limits and Thresholds Amendments and National Insurance Funds Payments) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 17 January, be approved—(*Stuart Andrew.*)

The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision on the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 2 March (Standing Order No. 41A)).

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

That the draft Tax Credits, Child Benefit and Guardian's Allowance Up-rating Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 17 January, be approved.—(*Stuart Andrew.*)

The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision on the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 2 March (Standing Order No. 41A)).

Rural Communities in Cumbria: Levelling Up

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Miss Dines.)

7.12 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): It is a great honour to be able to open this debate on support for levelling up rural communities in Cumbria. The backdrop to this is that I very much welcome the Government's White Paper on levelling up, but I want to highlight and stress that this is not just about towns and cities, and shine a light on some important issues facing our rural communities that the levelling-up agenda can address. There are laudable aims in the White Paper, but I say to the Minister, and to the Government, that this is about not just his Department but other Departments. I really plead with the Government to work cross-departmentally to deliver some of the aims for our rural communities.

Sadly, rural isolation and poor connectivity are endemic issues in many parts of our country, and particularly in my constituency. In addition, there are significant physical connectivity issues. Penrith and the Border is the largest constituency by land mass in England, and that has significant issues for both road and rail connectivity. I very much welcome the A66 northern trans-Pennine project. This major infrastructure project is much needed due to congestion issues, traffic issues, and very importantly, safety issues. I really urge the Government to listen to local communities, and I have been voicing these concerns on their behalf. We need to get this project right. I have raised this with the Prime Minister. We need to make sure that communities such as Warcop, Musgrave and Sandford are listened to with regard to the correct route.

The major infrastructure projects that are going on up and down the land are very important; they are the major arteries. That is very good, but we also need to consider the veins and capillaries. In rural areas, the capillaries are things like rural buses and rural roads, and we very much need to address that. For buses, we need to look at the funding structure. I very much welcome the rural mobility fund, which Cumbria will benefit from. Sadly, in 2014, Cumbria County Council took the decision to stop using central Government moneys to subsidise commercial services, and unfortunately some services had to close because of that. It left a big gap. We need to revisit that at central Government and local government levels.

We have fantastic volunteer schemes in Cumbria. We have the Fellrunner bus and the Border Rambler bus, and we have council-run schemes such as Rural Wheels, Village Wheels and Community Wheels in Alston Moor, but I want central Government and local government to work together with local operators. I have met many private operators that stand ready and waiting to reinstate many of the services that were cut. If we get the funding structure right and if local government spends sensibly the money given to it by central Government, we can fulfil that need.

Sadly, a lot of the positive agenda from the Government is London-centric. We talk about buses and hailing buses with apps and things like that, but if someone is in rural Cumbria and they do not have a signal on their mobile phone, these London-based apps with good connectivity

will not work. I am an equine vet by background, so it has to be horses for courses. We have to get it right in our rural settings. I stress to the Government and the Minister that Cumbria is not London.

On that note, we need support for road transport. As I have said, rural areas are very different. We have different needs in rural parts of the world in terms of fuel and diesel vehicles and so on. We are very much shifting to more electric vehicles, but if we are going to do that, we need a fast roll-out of the charging mechanisms, too. We have to ensure that it is tailored for rural communities.

With rail connectivity, I would like to see some joined-up thinking across our United Kingdom and in the borderlands region, with the Scottish Government working with the UK Government and local authorities to extend the Borders railway down to Carlisle. That would be fantastic for our region and the United Kingdom. On a smaller note, but a very important one for a northern community such as my constituency, I would very much like to see Gisland station reopened, and we have been working with the Department for Transport on that. Opening up stations and connecting train lines are very important to get people connected to each other.

That is a bit on physical connectivity, but I want to touch on virtual connectivity, too. That has been brought into sharp relief during the pandemic with people working at home, isolating at home and their kids being taught at home. If people have poor broadband or poor internet, that comes into sharp relief. For farmers trying to file their payments, it has come into sharp relief, too.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, Devon has much in common with Cumbria when we look at the topography and the need to get rural broadband. It is great that my hon. Friend is standing up for Cumbria, but if there is one thing we need to fix across the country, it is rural broadband and broadband generally, because of everything else follows that. The pandemic has shown how much we need it and how much more we can do. Sometimes, broadband stops the need for physical movement, too. I very much support my hon. Friend's great drive for rural Cumbria, but may I make a plea for rural Devon, too?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Cheeky.

Dr Hudson: I thank my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee on which I am privileged to sit. He makes a fantastic point. It is about connectivity across our great country, and rural Devon is the same as rural Cornwall and the same as rural Cumbria, and we need to get it right. We have to ensure that everyone gets good broadband and a good mobile phone signal. It is a point well made.

The Government aim to have gigabit-capable broadband to 85% of the United Kingdom by 2025. I hope that we can still move that way, but in my constituency, gigabit availability unfortunately languishes at a low 7.2% and the download speed is just over half the national average, so we are well behind. My plea is that we can have some help with that. In our part of the world, the mobile signal is poor. Sadly, there are many notspots in my part of the world.

The Government have taken some positive steps. I welcome Project Gigabit. The shared rural network will have a key impact, too, as will the voucher schemes.

Communities are partnering with fantastic companies, such as Broadband for the Rural North. I have seen that first hand in communities such as Kirkoswald, Mallerstang and Ravenstonedale. I pay tribute to companies such as B4RN, its chief executive Michael Lee, the teams and the volunteers who do fantastic work to connect people in isolated communities. I make a plea to the Minister for more help from his Department, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and indeed the Home Office in terms of shared mobile phone masts for emergencies.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, my neighbour, for securing this important debate and I congratulate him on a good speech. Does he agree that the communities of which he rightly speaks are at huge risk as affordable and family homes collapse into the Airbnb and second homes sector? There cannot really be levelling up for rural Cumbria if the Government will not take action to ensure that those communities are protected and that a limit is put on the number of Airbnbs and second homes that there can be in our communities.

Dr Hudson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which I note. If he can temper his patience, I will get on to that topic shortly. I am surprised to see him here; I expected to see him in my constituency perhaps where he has been a frequent and regular visitor in recent weeks. Anyone might wonder whether boundary changes were imminent. I gently and respectfully remind him that we share similar issues in our two constituencies, but we do not share the same constituency.

I put it to the Government that we need to be cautious about future changes to things such as the BBC. In rural parts of the world, terrestrial TV is ever important and the BBC and public service broadcasters are a treasured national asset that deliver news, education and drama. Again, that came into sharp relief in the pandemic when kids at home were delivered a fantastic education through it. For rural areas, where we depend on terrestrial TV and where many homes do not have the internet at all, we cannot be thinking at a Government level about moving to a subscription-based model. I caution the Government that we need to be careful when we are making decisions about the treasured asset that is the BBC.

I turn now to interactions and local democracy. In the pandemic, our vital parish councils, which do such wonderful things for our communities, could meet in virtual or hybrid formats. Sadly, that modality is not now available. That is important and I have raised it with the Secretary of State on a number of occasions. I urge the Government to allow parish councils to continue to meet in virtual or hybrid formats. There are issues with rural isolation and the weather, with people's jobs or caring responsibilities and with farmers. If we can empower local people to contribute to local democracy through that, we can learn the positive lessons of the pandemic.

In Cumbria, we are facing significant reform at a local government level with the changes to unitary councils. I am on public record as being against that, as I do not think now is the time for us to be doing it, and the groupings go against the natural geography and the community bonds. That said, we are where we are and

[Dr Hudson]

we have to make the best of it and make it work. I make a plea to the Department, however, that ongoing projects should not be paralysed by that reshuffling and that we should certainly ensure that local democratic changes do not compromise local communities.

I turn now to the farming and agricultural sector, which is an important aspect of my constituency economically, as came into sharp relief during the pandemic because of food security. I pay tribute to our fantastic UK farmers and Cumbria farmers who deliver food to us and put food on our tables. Anyone in the food processing and marketing sectors needs to be thanked for what they have done. They are key workers.

The farming community faces many challenges, such as the changes to the funding system with the new environmental land management schemes. We also face challenges from trade deals. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, on which I sit, is now looking at the Australia trade deal. There are significant challenges to our farming communities and we have to ensure that the Government get it right and do not undermine or undercut our farmers so that we can stand up for our values on high environmental and animal welfare standards and can be a beacon for the rest of the world. I ask the Levelling Up Department to work with DEFRA to support that sector.

That sector has also been significantly challenged by seasonal labour issues—we have been looking at that on the EFRA Committee as well—and there are serious issues in the food processing sector. Again, the farming community now has a crisis that has been ongoing in the pig sector. Currently, in excess of 40,000 pigs have been slaughtered on farm that have not subsequently gone into the food supply chain, and I really urge the Government to work cross-Government to mitigate and avert this crisis.

Another huge part of the rural economy in Cumbria is tourism and hospitality. Again, they are facing similar labour issues. That has been exacerbated by covid, but Brexit has certainly been a factor, and we need to make sure that we can supply the labour that our vital businesses need locally. This sector needs ongoing support, and I urge the Minister to work with the Treasury to make sure that we can keep some of the measures in place, such as the VAT cut for tourism and hospitality businesses, that will make things better for them. We need to think about tax relief for small rural businesses as well.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) talked about the pressure on housing in local communities. We are a fantastic tourism part of the world up in Cumbria, and we have seen huge numbers of people come during the pandemic and when we started to open up. The pressure on local people to find local affordable housing has again come into sharp relief. With the increasing number of second homes in the area, locals are basically being priced out of their own local community. I really urge the Government to look at and address that with affordable housing, sensible planning and sensible measures, so that people can get on the housing ladder and it is not to their detriment when people come in and take second homes. I really urge the Government to look at that. Housing in our part of the world is very different from that in London. Again, when the Government are making changes and

talking about changing boilers and such things, we have to bear in mind that many people in rural parts of the world have oil boilers, and we have to make sure we adapt. It is horses for courses.

Schools, pubs, shops and churches are the lifeblood of our local communities, and they need support. Many local communities are stepping up and acting together, such as the Kirkoswald community shop, and Bampton Valley community pub has now put together a shared programme to set up the pub again. However, we should not have to rely on the community stepping forward. We must get central Government working with local government and local communities, so I really urge the local government Department to offer more small grants so that we can put the life back into local communities.

Education is so important, and it plays a huge role in levelling up, with opportunities for young and old. We have had a very difficult time in Cumbria, and we have lost Newton Rigg College, the only land-based college in Cumbria. We worked very hard to try to save the college, but unfortunately that was unsuccessful. We now have pieces of the jigsaw coming together to try to rebuild land-based education in our community. I pay tribute to Newton Rigg Ltd, Newton Rigg Equestrian, Ullswater Community College and Myerscough College, which are working together with the Ernest Cook Trust and local stakeholders to see if we can get pieces of the jigsaw together. It is important that we rebuild land-based education in Cumbria.

To give an example, Ullswater Community College is a local high school with over 1,500 pupils, led brilliantly by headteacher Stephen Gilby, with a 600 square mile catchment area. I have raised this with the Prime Minister and the Education Secretary, but it urgently needs a rebuild, and I really press that message home to the Government. Outdoor education in Cumbria is a blessing for us, and that sector also needs to be supported. We have fantastic outdoor education centres, such as Blencathra outward bound centre. This is part of the recovery, it is about the life chances of young folk and it is very important for mental health.

Health underpins levelling up, so I really urge the Government to support rural healthcare. We welcome the fact that we have a new cancer centre that has opened up in Carlisle and a new diagnostic centre in Penrith, but on mental health we need to make sure that the message of parity with physical health comes through loud and clear. In the EFRA Committee, we have triggered an inquiry on rural mental health looking at the key issues and the key stressors. We have significant risk factors in our rural communities. We get shock events; we get floods, we get storms. Professions such as my own—the veterinary profession, but farmers as well—are over-represented with a risk of mental health and suicide, and there are the pressures of running businesses in our isolated communities. I urge the Government to try to address many of those issues at cross-Government level, and to support the communities that we live in and we love. We want to ensure that the people's voice is heard down here in Westminster and in Whitehall.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Glorious Ribbles Valley is not London either, so I wait with eager anticipation, Minister, for your response.

7.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Neil O'Brien): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) on securing this important debate. He is a relentless champion for his community, and the many different issues that he touched on this evening are a small selection of the matters he has raised with us. He always makes important and serious contributions to driving forward the different policy agendas he has raised.

Let me address some of the specific points raised by my hon. Friend. One of the themes of his speech—appropriately enough for a vet, horses for courses—was about how the levelling-up agenda must be shaped to the needs of rural communities such as the one he represents in Cumbria. He raised the issue of second homes, and I am acutely conscious of the strong feelings held by him and his constituents about that. He will know that we recently closed the second homes tax loophole, which was being abused. That was a serious part of the problem, and a serious contribution to tackling it. Partly as a result of my hon. Friend's work on this issue, we are considering what further steps we can take to address it. Many local people have a sense of their children not being able to live where they grew up, or of not being able to stay in their own community because it is a wonderfully attractive place. We all love those places, but we must not kill the thing we love by local people not being able to live there. My hon. Friend is completely correct, and it is something we are actively looking at.

Tim Farron: Given the urgency of this, I cannot stress how important it is that action is taken, well, yesterday really. In the South Lakeland District, there has been a 32% rise in the number of holiday lets in one single year. That is the private rented sector collapsing into the “not lived in” market. We need action now. Let us please not have another inquiry.

Neil O'Brien: I completely agree with that, and we have the same sense of urgency about this issue.

My hon. Friend raised a point about the need for small grants in the kind of community he represents. That is exactly why we have set up the new £150 million community ownership fund, which is helping people across the country take control of assets that are of importance to the local community, from pubs to sports pitches to important cultural locations. We are at the start of allocating that fund, and I am sure my hon. Friend will be assiduous in helping us to identify fantastic projects in his constituency that are deserving of such support.

My hon. Friend raised the issue of how things work in the kind of area he represents, and about parish councils sitting virtually. He has made numerous representations to us on that point, and again today he made a powerful argument. The Government launched a call for evidence last year to gather views and inform our longer term decision about whether to make express provision for councils to meet remotely on a permanent basis. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is considering the responses to that consultation, and will respond shortly. I know that many local councillors found it extremely useful to have a wider range of voices able to attend, particularly in

areas where the geography is large and the community is somewhat older. A decision has not been made, although once again my hon. Friend made a powerful case on behalf of his constituents.

Likewise, as part of my hon. Friend's theme of how Cumbria is not London and has different challenges and different sorts of issues, he made important points about mental health. It is really a crusade for this Government to have true parity between the treatment of mental and physical diseases, of exactly the kind my hon. Friend called for. As part of that, one of the most exciting things that the Government are doing as part of the anti-loneliness agenda is rolling out social prescribing across the country. There is a target to have 900,000 people referred through the NHS to social prescribing by 2023-24. My hon. Friend is a vet, and a long time ago I was a medical student, and when I met patients I was struck how often both their medical needs in the traditional sense and many mental health issues were not being grappled with. Through the social prescribing agenda, we can start to have a proper plan to connect those people to the help that they need. He was right to raise that.

My hon. Friend was also right to raise terrestrial TV. There are places where people cannot just get on to an ultrafast fibre broadband connection, so that terrestrial TV signal will remain extremely important.

I will touch on some of the wider things that the Government are doing across the whole of Cumbria—of course, there are huge economic connections between all the parts of the county. Our levelling-up funds are making a big difference. Barrow, Carlisle, Cleator Moor, Millom and Workington are all getting a share of £110 million of investment through the towns fund to improve town centres and public services, which will also benefit my hon. Friend's constituents. Through the first round of the levelling-up fund, £16 million is being invested, and there is much more of that £4.8 billion fund to come.

My hon. Friend will be acutely aware that the landmark and historic borderlands growth deal is helping both sides of the border—those in Cumbria and in southern Scotland. It is helping with projects such as the upgrade to Carlisle railway station and creating 5,000 new well-paying jobs. In total, I think it is bringing £452 million of fresh investment into Cumbria, Northumberland and southern Scotland.

The different funds are doing a lot, but there are also national programmes recognising the central importance of the connectivity issues that my hon. Friend raised—they have the potential to transform the economy of some rural areas—and addressing them. That is exactly why we did the £1 billion deal with mobile network operators. He talked about sharing masts, and that is exactly what we will be doing through the shared rural network. In Cumbria, the deal will mean that 4G coverage from all mobile network operators will rise to a minimum of 88%, up from 73%, and coverage from at least one network will go up from 94% to 98%. We are starting to close off those notspots that he correctly identified. Through Project Gigabit and our £5 billion investment, we will also be connecting broadband across Cumbria and driving up high-quality coverage.

My hon. Friend has been a brilliant champion on all these issues—he raised so many of them—but I am conscious of time and the need to bring my remarks to

[Neil O'Brien]

a close. He raised devolution and the future of local government in Cumbria. In the levelling-up White Paper we alluded to the prospect of a devolution deal for Cumbria, which is an exciting prospect that we can use to address many of the specific issues that he raised in this important debate.

My hon. Friend's fundamental thesis is completely correct: we must have a levelling-up agenda that works with the grain of what is going on locally. When we go to Cumbria, we see its beauty, all the things that are

fantastic about it and the new investment, but we are also conscious that, for many people, it is an area of low pay and one with a need for more high-quality jobs and new opportunities to learn and progress. He has been the most fantastic champion across all those issues and I look forward to working together with him as we drive them forward.

Question put and agreed to.

7.38 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 23 February 2022

[MR CLIVE BETTS *in the Chair*]

Food and Farming: Devon and Cornwall

9.30 am

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Welcome, everyone, to this morning's sitting. I am still asked by the House of Commons Commission to remind hon. Members to observe social distancing and wear masks—that, apparently, is still the guidance and advice.

Sir Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and West Devon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered food and farming in Devon and Cornwall.

I am most grateful and delighted to have secured this important debate on food and farming in Devon. It is good to see so many of my colleagues from Devon, and it is very good, if I may say so, to see some honorary Devonians this morning: the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). It is a particular joy to see them so interested in food and farming in Devon. Of course, many of the themes on which we will touch will be of common interest to those whom they represent and so, speaking for myself and, I am sure, all my colleagues, we are delighted to see them.

I should say straightaway that I own farmland in Devon and derive an income from it. Although I do not myself currently farm the land, it is eligible for some of the schemes that I will discuss today and therefore it is possible that I might benefit from them.

A prosperous and flourishing agriculture in the United Kingdom is in the national interest—I do not imagine that that is a controversial statement in this company. It is not a dispensable or superfluous activity. Recent international events have confirmed, in the most dramatic way, that food production, and more specifically food security, is of increasing national importance and should be a vital Government priority. It does not need much imagination or foresight to see that, for some time now, we have been living through a new and unstable phase of international affairs. The effects of pandemics, wars—threatened and actual—and climate change are thrust upon us with every news bulletin. We cannot take for granted an uninterrupted international supply chain and an endless stream of imports.

On Monday this week, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence observed that the impact of a Russian invasion in Ukraine—now already in action—would be to remove access to the breadbasket of the world. It would have the most deleterious impacts upon vulnerable states and nations throughout the world. Similarly, the gradual erosion by climate change of fertile and cultivable areas of the world, increasing regional tensions, confronts us with a growing threat to the interest of this country in ensuring a constant and adequate food supply to its people. Perhaps not for a very long time has it been so critical that our domestic agricultural policies—under our own exclusive control again after 45 years—should be got right. That is no

doubt why the Government sensibly included a legal duty on Ministers, in devising the financial support schemes, to have regard to the need to encourage the production of food and to report each five years to Parliament on food security.

However, agriculture in Devon and Cornwall, like farming all over the country, faces a time of great unpredictability and uncertainty. It must adapt to the major implications of the Agriculture Act 2020 and of changes in our trading relationships after our exit from the European Union.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. and learned Gentleman on initiating the debate. It is specifically about food and farming in Devon, but, as he rightly said, when it comes to farming, Northern Ireland is comparable. Does he agree that, while farmers in my constituency and across Northern Ireland have recently had a reported rise in income, their outgoings will far outstrip their income, and that, if any modernisation or diversification is to take place, the Government need to step up and implement funding streams that can be allocated to those who need them most, UK-wide? The right hon. and learned Gentleman and I discussed this before the debate. He and I understand well that our Minister in Northern Ireland has grasped the important issue of farming—I know that the Minister here has done the same—but does he feel that whatever happens in Devon, the same should happen in Strangford?

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I thought the hon. Gentleman wasn't going to make a speech this morning.

Sir Geoffrey Cox: You might say that, Mr Betts; I couldn't possibly comment. What I can say is that I agree with the hon. Gentleman: the commonality of interests between farmers in Devon and Northern Ireland is obvious and clear. Northern Ireland is an important part of the United Kingdom. It is important for farmers throughout our great country that these policies should be got right. Now is not the time to take unnecessary risks with our capacity to grow food and sustain the nation, but the time to seize the opportunities the moment brings.

Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): I very much agree with the thrust of my right hon. and learned Friend's speech. On self-sufficiency and food security, currently the UK enjoys 64% self-sufficiency. The Government have no shortage of targets in other areas. Does he agree that it would be quite sensible to have a target to increase that figure to, say, 75% over the next decade? What is wrong with that?

Sir Geoffrey Cox: I agree with every word of my hon. Friend's intervention. Food security, as I will come on to say, should be at the heart of the Government's policy making.

We cannot ignore the international context. What more does it take than tanks rolling across the border of a European nation—one that has been famous in history as the breadbasket of the world? Are we seriously going to assume that from now on the uninterrupted supply of food can simply be counted on? Or are the Government to start to take the precautions necessary to ensure that the food supply for the people of this country is guaranteed?

[*Sir Geoffrey Cox*]

One way to do that would be to adopt the measure proposed by my eminently wise neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter).

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Ind): On security of supply, one of the challenges that is clear to me is that we have the food, but not necessarily the people to farm it. I heard on Radio 4—yesterday morning, I think—of a pig farm of something like 300,000 pigs where 4,500 were going to have to be killed because it did not have the labour force. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the issue of the labour force in agriculture needs to be taken much more seriously by the Government? The concept that these incredibly complicated jobs are low-skilled or unskilled is utterly wrong; it is not worthy of the people who do them. We need to recognise the skill, reward it, and attract those workers, from both within the United Kingdom and further afield.

Sir Geoffrey Cox: The panel of wisdom assembled this morning is extraordinary; it is almost as if my hon. Friends have read the speech that I prepared last night. Of course the issue of labour is critical.

I supported the departure of this country from the European Union. I believed in every fibre of my being that the freedoms it would permit our nation, if seized and enacted, would bring great benefits, not only to the farmers of our country but to our country as a whole. I do not believe the people of this country would fail to understand the need of British farming for skilled labour. I do not think that was the objection of the millions who voted for Brexit. They would understand a policy of flexibility.

There is no need for us to maintain, with adamant stubbornness, a policy that leads to labour shortages in British farming. So I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) completely. Nowhere is this uncertainty felt more keenly than in Devon, where 13% of the economy of the county consists of food production, almost twice the national average. No one seriously argued that an area-based direct payment scheme, such as the one we have, should be retained. Agricultural support should be aimed, as far as possible, at those who look after and promote the wellbeing of the land, or who genuinely make their livelihoods from it.

The aims and intentions of the Agriculture Act 2020 were widely supported, including by me, but those direct payments accounted on average for 55% of the total farm incomes of England. In the south-west, even with the farm payments, the farm business survey found that the average income of a lowland grazing farm in 2019 was just £4,048. Without those payments, there would have been a loss of £10,000, or closer to £14,000 if existing agri-environmental payments are included.

Last year, the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board found that the levels of the new environmental land management scheme then published would, even at the advanced tier to which many could not aspire, not remotely replace the current payments. Yet, according to the agricultural transition plan, by 2024 the direct payments will have been reduced by half, and by 2027 they are due to end completely.

The Public Accounts Committee has described the Department's approach as "blind optimism". I do not know, but I certainly hope that that is not an accurate description, and I look to the Minister to reassure me. So far, however, no impact assessment has been published of the effects of the design of these new schemes on food production and farming in Devon, or elsewhere. Nor have measurable standards yet been published by which the environmental benefits and farming outcomes can be assessed.

The Minister herself, in answer to a question about upland farming in April 2020, nearly two years ago, said that she understood the need for payment rates to be attractive to achieve the level of uptake and the environmental outcomes we need to see. The Government have suggested—I believe is an accepted and understood figure—that only if we achieve participation in the sustainable farming incentive of around 70% of all farmers can the scheme succeed.

I understand that elements of the new scheme are still under development, but I must tell the Minister that neither the current published rates, nor the schemes as so far defined, are attracting much enthusiasm from the farm businesses and farmers I represent. They simply cannot yet see sufficiently how these schemes will be relevant to the economic survival of their farms. That anecdotal evidence is supported by the growing chorus of concern from the industry. The Tenant Farmers Association, farming one third of the land in England, has described the current plans as

"a complex patchwork of small schemes of limited impact with little which seems to stitch them together."

The Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—it is a pleasure to see its Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), here this morning—the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee have all expressed their growing sense of dismay and apprehension. Steadily and relentlessly, the clock is ticking down for Devonshire and Cornish farmers. In the meantime, as the hon. Member for Strangford pointed out, their costs continue to soar.

I understand that in the cockpit of a commercial aircraft coming in to land, sirens and alarms will go off if the plane is approaching the runway either too low or too slow. The sirens are going off now on the Department's transitional plan. If the market is to play a greater role in farm incomes in the future, it might be less troubling if one could see the necessary vigour and energy invested in creating new markets for British produce around the world—if we could see a bright and bold new vision of a British agricultural export agency with a mission and a passion to convey the magnificent story we have to tell about the quality of British food and to convert it into new opportunities. Perhaps the Minister might say a word about what the Government are doing in this respect.

If Devon and Cornwall's farmers could sense that the Government were willing to invest in them and back them with the kind of tailor-made and well-designed policies that would lift their collective sales, I have no doubt that they would accept with alacrity the challenge of adaptation, investment and flexibility that these changes will require of them.

Jim Shannon: I was watching "Countryfile" on Sunday night, and sugar beet producers in England were mentioned. As we all know, there is an onus on the Minister, but

there is also an onus on the companies that buy the product to give farmers the right price for their product. In many cases, the processing company that was mentioned—its name has escaped my mind—has upped its price, but the price has not kept in check with the cost. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right to press the Minister, but does he agree that we should also press companies to give the producers—the farmers—the right price for their product?

Sir Geoffrey Cox: I completely agree that fairness within the supply and the price chain is vital. I think we have lost some momentum that we gathered a few years back with the enactment of various measures that this Government took in trying to create greater awareness of these matters within the industry and the price chain.

The hon. Gentleman has pointed out one further aspect of what I am attempting to convey. What we need is a conviction at the heart of Government of the importance of British farming. I do not doubt that the Minister herself has that conviction. I do not doubt that the Secretary of State, who is a valued colleague of ours in the south-west, has that conviction. I sometimes doubt that, at the centre of the Government's councils, that conviction is always as persuasive and influential as it should be. I simply say again: at a time when we are confronting another dictator on the borders of Europe, how much more evidence do we need that food security should be a crucial priority at the heart of Government policy making?

If farmers felt that policies were being designed in our post-Brexit world to lift them up and help them make the most of the market, I have no doubt that they would seize those opportunities with alacrity. They were told that regulation would be handled differently and would not, as so often is the case, stifle farmers with bureaucracy and penalisation, but that there would be—I quote from the transition plan—a “new, more effective approach”. Well, someone appears to have forgotten to send the memo to the Environment Agency. Its new guidance on the farming rules for water has caused widespread dismay about the spreading of muck. I understand that dairy farmers are being visited today and told that they must build more storage for their slurry and invest in their farms—investment that they can ill afford at the moment, and even if they can afford it, they are frequently refused planning permission at the instigation of Natural England.

Again and again I hear the same of other agencies like Natural England, whose chief executive I have invited to a summit meeting on Dartmoor later this year to discuss its relationship with working farmers on the moor. We must see this fabled new approach manifested in the everyday experience of farmers. We must take the freedom that our departure from the European Union has conveyed upon us and create the light-touch, unbureaucratic approach for which the farming community is yearning. We must also see the sums promised for investment in on-farm productivity materialise, increase, and be simple to access and draw down.

Perhaps it is too lugubriously pessimistic to remind oneself of the ill-fated Rural Payments Agency and the long history of misery that its performance in administering the area-based payments so often caused those who had to deal with it. Perhaps it is too easy to believe that the administration of these new, as yet undeveloped and

unfledged schemes will suffer the same fate in execution as they have appeared to in design. There are more hopeful omens: all is not doom and gloom, as I know the Minister will tell us. The countryside stewardship applications have been simplified, the rates have been increased and—lo and behold—there has been a 30% increase in the uptake of that scheme. Nobody rejoices in that fact more than I, but as the Minister will accept, it is not by itself enough. I hope she will give us this morning greater grounds for hope than, I am afraid, my more pessimistic observation produces at the moment.

This is not just a question of the observable facts. Sometimes one must rely on one's intuition, and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs so often seems to wear an air of defeatism and lack the foresight, conviction and urgency that the situation demands. If they do not feel they are getting a fair audience at the heart of the councils of government, I understand that. That is why each one of us sitting here this morning can play our part in lending strength to my hon. Friend the Minister's elbow and that of her boss, the Secretary of State. We stand here at their side, urging them on, willing to play any part—willing to march, to organise and to express solidarity with the team that we send into battle to fight the British farming corner in the Cabinet and the Government. In that fight she can count on my loyal, steadfast support.

I cannot, I am afraid, touch much more on optimistic and encouraging notes, because I must now turn to the topic of pigs. The Minister knows that pig farmers have suffered acutely from the effects of the pandemic. I have had correspondence with the Secretary of State on this pressing issue. The measures taken by the Government have been welcome, but inadequate to prevent a silent catastrophe on pig farms in Devon. Barely a quarter of the 800 visas for butchers have been taken up. The situation on the farms is just as desperate as when I first corresponded with the Minister last year—indeed, more so. One such local farmer has written to me just this week to say that even after culling hundreds of animals, “we have 2,700 fattening pigs here whereas we would previously only have had 600 weaners and 650 newborn piglets. We have had to make significant investment”—

they have spent over £100,00—

“into adapting buildings to house all these much larger pigs, as well as buying two new bulk bins to store the extra food and also having to install extra feeding equipment. Meanwhile the cost of animal feed has continued to rocket. The financial burden is immense. The stress of this situation is terrible.”

Thus writes a farming family from Langtree, in Torridge in Devon.

Just yesterday the Irish Government followed other Governments, including Northern Ireland and Scotland, by announcing a hardship fund to allow flat-rate payments to farmers who send more than 200 pigs to slaughter each year. The week before last, there was a crisis meeting with the Minister. I would be glad to hear the progress that the Minister is making in this emergency—and it is an emergency.

There is a silent catastrophe going on in pig farms not only in Devon and Cornwall but throughout our country. The issue requires urgent action. The national interest demands that the Government place food security and agriculture in this country at the heart of their policy making. Surely, as the party of the countryside, we

[*Sir Geoffrey Cox*]

cannot stand by while farming—the very sinew of our rural communities—wither away. Of course adaptations to economic circumstances and modern requirements are necessary but, as the uncertainties and perils of world events remind us with acute and ever-growing force, the neglect of our domestic capacity to feed ourselves would be an omission for which the British people will, rightly, not forgive us.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Slightly out of order, I call the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, who I know has to return to a Select Committee meeting.

9.57 am

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I thank you for your co-operation, Mr Betts. The hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) is chairing the meeting, so I need to go back and check that all is well. I am sure it will be.

I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Sir Geoffrey Cox) for bringing this timely debate. He speaks with great passion. He has a very rural seat and he understands rural life and farming. I want to echo much of what he said, without trying to repeat it all. The point about food security and the situation in Ukraine is quite simple, inasmuch as we do not grow bananas or pineapples, so we will not become completely self-sufficient, but what we do grow well is grain, chicken, sheep, cattle and dairy.

There is an issue of food security, because Ukraine is the breadbasket of the world, as is the western part of Russia: I have visited Bryansk in the past and I remember that the one thing I wanted to bring home with me was the soil. I have never seen such beautiful soil in my life. It can grow absolutely everything. Therefore, as we change agricultural policy, we need to protect the environment but we need food. That is not an old message but the same message, and I will repeat it while I have breath in my body.

There is not enough food in the Agriculture Act. The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food, my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), is doing a great job trying to adapt the policy to incorporate food. I still say that food is a public good. A lot of people in this country still do not have enough food, and I am absolutely certain that they believe it to be a public good. The trouble is that we very often debate many of these issues because we are very full-bellied. I should declare an interest: I am overly full-bellied. The simple fact is that we need to produce food, and the type of food that we can produce is affected by the situation in Ukraine. I need to put that clearly on the record.

The payments can be got right. The level of payment has been raised significantly in the new environmental land management system, the sustainable farming incentive and the stewardship scheme, but the other payments are not yet enough to attract farmers into such schemes. We are taking very significant amounts of money away from farmers, and by 2024, half their payments will be gone and will not be replaced by the new payments. Although payments are not entirely expected to be replaced, they need to be enough to maintain a good quality of production.

I believe that we in the Conservative party, and on both sides of the House, see agriculture as the production of food environmentally. Farmers want to produce food. They actually believe that that is in their DNA, and that they should feed this country. That is what they want to do, that is what gets them up in the morning, and that is what gets them to milk their cows, look after their sheep and poultry and grow their corn. That is what they do: they produce good, high-quality food to feed this country. As we adapt our policies, for goodness' sake let us actually ensure that food is at their heart, and that there is enough payment out there to keep that going.

Many moons ago, Anthony Gibson, who was the area secretary for the National Farmers Union, used to talk about the area payments. He used to say that farmers should really just put them in a separate bank account and not use them, and then one day they could retire in great wealth. Of course, to keep their businesses going, farmers poured all those payments into the farm. You could argue about whether they were right or wrong to do that, but those payments were used to keep them farming and producing food. Ironically, that probably helped to keep food prices down because it kept production up.

That is the other issue that we must face as a Government: if we bring about policies that reduce food production in this country—which we will if we do not do some tweaking—we will import more food, and if we can get it, the prices will go up. The Treasury does not want further food inflation because there is a lot of it out there at the moment. Farming prices have probably never been better, but farming costs have never been higher: that is the issue.

As much as I would love for the Minister to tell us how she will reduce the price of fertiliser from £650 to £250 a tonne, I accept that that is probably beyond her remit. We must accept that, and we may have to accept some more limited use of urea and other fertilisers. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter) mentioned the farming rules for water. We are perhaps getting somewhere where we can have some common sense on those. The Minister has worked very hard in bringing that about.

Another issue that was raised when I was at the NFU conference with the Secretary of State and our very able Minister is that Wales and Scotland will defer reducing the basic payment scheme. I am not saying that we should necessarily follow, but we have to realise that there will be competition across the borders, and that farmers in Wales, Scotland and, I suspect, Northern Ireland will have higher direct payments, which farmers use to keep their farming going. That is why it is even more imperative to get those payments right and get them out there.

I will not speak for too long because my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon did such a good job of laying out the situation. On labour, he is absolutely right: we in this country did not vote to stop all labour coming in; we voted to have a controlled system. That is where the Home Office has been very slow indeed. We had an interesting meeting with a Home Office Minister, in which he was completely intransigent, and what he told us was largely wrong and we had to try to sort out the situation. I am training my guns not just on the Home Office. I am saying quite clearly, and I want this on the record, that the processors have not done their job. They have not upped their

game. They have not slaughtered enough pigs and have kept the situation tight on the farms so that they can buy those pigs at a knockdown price.

Furthermore, and this I really want to go on the record, some farmers in Yorkshire spoke out against their processors for the treatment they had had, because those pigs were under contract but the processors would not take them. They were blackballed by those processors. I want that clearly on the record, because I will not have people bullied, and they are bullies. I know the Minister is doing her best to sort it, but we need some tough legislation in place so that there are proper contracts that those processors honour. The Government have put in place a private storage scheme. The processors have not taken it up like they should, and I turn my guns on them as well.

We need not only big slaughterhouses but some smaller ones, and I know the Minister is working on that, because we need to create some competition. At the moment, those great big players are holding everyone to ransom. We tell farmers, "Get a contract. Get closer to the market. Get your things directly into the supermarkets and the big retailers." That is fine until farmers are entirely in the hands of the big processors and retailers. Anyone with cattle or sheep can take them to market, and my grandfather used to say, "Take them to market and get a market price." What he meant by that was that if a person took them to market and did not like the market price, they could bring them home again and take them somewhere else. Once they have been processed—I do not have to explain to you, Mr Betts, why they cannot be brought back—they are gone and in the food chain.

The processor says, "Well, they didn't really grade—there was something wrong with them," but very often they were perfectly good, healthy livestock. That is the issue, and we have got to sort that out. I will be interested to read the record in *Hansard* of exactly how the Minister replies, because we need to get the labour situation and processing right. I have mentioned the farming rules for water, and I believe we will get them right. I say to the Minister that the direction of travel is not wrong, but the means of getting there are not right.

In fairness to the Department, it has worked hard to try to get the system to work but we must reduce the bureaucracy. The Secretary of State gave us assurances yesterday that it would be reduced. I clocked it all, and when he is next in front of the Select Committee it may well be quoted back to him. He also talked about flexibility of payment and said that there are not three pillars any more. He said that we can move money around and have some great tree planting, but if we do not need quite so much for tree planting this year, we can perhaps put a bit more into farming and so on. Let us ensure, Minister, that that is delivered, because that is the benefit of no longer being in the common agricultural policy.

The trouble is that we were too reliant on the CAP for a method of managing agriculture in the countryside, and it is proving quite difficult to come up with an alternative, but we will; I am determined that we will, and I know the Minister is, too. Again, I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon for the debate. It is great to see so many hon. Members from Devon. As far as Northern Ireland and Westmorland are concerned, those Members can become honorary farmers from Devon today.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Four hon. Members want to speak, so that gives them about seven minutes each to allow the wind-ups to start at 20 minutes to.

10.9 am

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I am hugely grateful to the right hon. and learned Member for Torridge and West Devon (Sir Geoffrey Cox) for an excellent speech, and for raising an important set of issues. I will not cheat: I am not a Devon or Cornwall Member. However, I am a Member from a western county that shares a farming heritage with Devon and Cornwall, particularly when it comes to livestock. As a Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament, I want to say that my party is utterly committed to those two counties, to the west of England, and to supporting farming, agriculture and rural communities more generally.

Although I differ from the right hon. and learned Gentleman on whether it was right to leave the European Union, it is clear that we agree that the common agricultural policy was one good reason to leave. It is one silver lining. The CAP is restrictive and did all sorts of harm, not only to UK farming but internationally, in terms of fairness of trade, and our standing with other countries, particularly those in the developing world where there is farming. It did not reward farmers for the good that they do.

In principle, I agree with the process towards ELMS. I do not believe that many Members who represent farming communities or people who farm think that ELMS is bad, in principle. However, I am deeply concerned that we may be botching the transition. There are three things I want to focus on. Some are accidental, but some are policy related, and I take issue with them.

A couple of months ago, farmers saw their first reduction of between 5% and 25% in their basic payment cheque. Over the next few years, that will decline to 50% and then to nothing. During that time, people will be—and already are—losing their farm income, without having a replacement available to them. What would any of us do if our income fell by half or more?

Some 85% of farm profitability in the livestock sector is from direct payments, so we are talking a colossal chunk of farmers' incomes. What Devon and Cornwall have in common with Cumbria is a preponderance of smaller family farms, which, we can be sure, will be hit the worst.

What will happen if farmers have a massive gap in their income over the coming years? They will do one of two things: go broke, or go backwards. They will either leave the industry altogether—taking the golden goodbye or, worse, just leaving because the business fails—or will have to look for other ways to make a living. That will mean piling sheep high, undoing all the good environmental work farms have done over the last several years, and will continue to do only if they are included in the schemes that are to come.

Losing farmers at this point is massively dangerous for food security, for all the reasons that have been given. For all the focus on energy security, and for all that we rely so heavily on supplies from Putin's Russia, we should be just as aware of the threat to our country's security if our food supply is interrupted. We are dependent on others for our food supply; more than a third comes

[Tim Farron]

from overseas. That is a dangerous place to be. If we do not have farmers, we do not have food. If we do not have farmers, we will have no hands to deliver the Government's environmental policies, either.

We are focused on a transition towards a system in which we pay public money for public goods. I completely agree with the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, who said that food is a public good—of course it is. There are also environmental and landscape public goods, but if we do not have farmers, those environmental policies are just nice bits of paper in a drawer. They will not get implemented if there is nobody on the land to do that. That is why botching the transition—an accident, I am sure—is something we should all be deeply concerned about.

I also look at what farmers who are in the market to do environmental good—as I know so many are—say about the sustainable farming incentive. They say, basically, that it is not sufficiently attractive to bring them in. I was talking to a regenerative farmer in Cumbria just a few weeks ago who has done enormously impressive things in a couple of years; the quality of their soil has increased enormously. They are absolutely in the mindset to want to get into the SFI, but they have chosen not to bother. It is just not worth the faff. This is a farm that is minded to carry on and do environmental good, but they will just ignore the Government's schemes because they do not think they are interesting or attractive enough.

What about all those people who are perhaps not so minded, or not so able to go in that direction? They will think, "You know what? I'll just get another 100 head of sheep. I'll try to make my living that way." I fear that the Government are sending farming backwards and decimating it, as family farmers will simply not be able to make a living. They will go out of business, or, at the very least, go backwards, and not meet the environmental targets that all of us, cross-party, want them to. There is the accident. Though the Government are trying to bring people into the ELMS process, I fear they are making the offer too unattractive and setting the bar too high. If people are not in the room, they will not be involved in delivering the schemes.

I am also worried about some counterproductive elements that are coming through in landscape recovery and other aspects of ELMS that are being developed. They provide a very active, real and lucrative incentive for landowners to perform English clearances. They reward landowners in places such as Cornwall, Devon or Cumbria—they probably do not even live there—with money for clearing off their tenant farmers and letting the farm go to seed. That is an outrage. I can see what will happen: people will sit around their Hampstead dinner tables, bragging to their friends about how green they are, having taken a massive chunk of money from the Government. How did they get that money? They got it by evicting someone whose family may have farmed that area for generations. What happens to the farmhouse and buildings? They become second homes and holiday lets. It is a decimation of farming and rural communities, and the Government are incentivising it.

We want to encourage nature. We see people maintaining woodland pasture, and balancing livestock with woodlands. They are doing carbon capture and all those other

things that are right. Let us make sure that the funding goes to the farmers, not to landowners who will exploit and expel those farmers and wreck our countryside in the process.

It is very hard to value food production—in Devon, in Cornwall, in Cumbria or elsewhere—if we are signing trade deals with countries that have worse animal welfare standards than ours, thereby bringing down our standards and potentially throwing our farmers under a bus. As has been said, the plight of the pig industry is a reminder that when it comes to migration policy, freedom is no good if it is not used. If 40,000 healthy pigs are slaughtered and thrown away, as NFU president Minette Batters was saying on the radio yesterday, then that is an outrage. That is happening because of a lack of staff in abattoirs and a lack of butchers, and because the Government's migration policy is not being used in a sovereign way. It is possible to be prisoner to an international organisation, but it is also possible to be prisoner to an ideology that stops us serving our community and our country—and punishes farmers in the process.

Farming is vital to food production in this country. It is vital to our environment, and it is vital to our rural communities. My fear is that as we move from a system that is far from perfect to one that we like the idea of, we botch that transition. That is what the Government are doing. They simply need to do one thing: peg basic payment at the current level and keep it there until ELMS is available to everyone.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Next to contribute is Anthony Mangnall. I remind Members again to limit speeches to seven minutes, or else the last speakers will not get as much time.

10.18 am

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, although it is somewhat daunting to follow my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Sir Geoffrey Cox), the Chair of the EFRA Committee—my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish)—and the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). I had all the joy of listening to the speech by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon, and none of the costs. It was a startling reminder of the extraordinary contribution that he makes to this House, and of the knowledge of farming that he brings to this place. He said everything that I want to say on this topic, so I will rattle through a few points—adding a slightly fishy element to my speech.

South Devon consists of a variety of coastal fishing fleets and small inland farms. Between myself and my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter), we have one of the largest proportions of 150-acre farms in the country. I take the view, as the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale said, that these people are the stewards of our land and our seas. They are not people who want to ruin the land for immediate gain; they want their families, and the generations that come after them, to look after their land, work with it and produce for this country. The landscape in our country is beautiful for precisely that reason—because our farmers look after it. DEFRA's policy has to be aligned with not only the need for productivity and

environmentalism, but the need to ensure a future generation of farmers who will look after our land and produce for our population.

During the pandemic, which we have managed to avoid talking about until now, it has been extraordinary to see the role of farm shops in our local rural communities, and the role that farmers have been able to play in producing for that infrastructure. We need to enhance that process and cultivate it. It not only created a circular economy, in which our farmers could produce for local farm shops, but showed people the true value of good, healthy, locally sourced, seasonal food, and of good beef, pork and sheep meat. That is a concept we need to build on.

I routinely hear the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Minister who is here today talk about engagement with fishermen and farmers; the over-quoted phrase is “working hand in glove”. Broadly, they do work hand in glove, and I know how hard the Minister works, but that hand-in-glove approach must provide fishermen and farmers with clarity on, and ease with, the new initiatives and schemes that we are establishing.

DEFRA has announced a litany of new initiatives, but the complexity of the forms involved—I have run through them with many of my constituents—is spellbinding, not least because these are small farmers. They hope to continue to produce on their land, but are routinely dissuaded from doing so by the complexities of even applying for the schemes. I urge the Minister to make sure that new initiatives are made simpler and easier, and to ensure that we really do work hand in glove with the sector.

We have also heard from colleagues on the need for on-farm productivity and better at-gate farm prices. If we can secure a local network and local market that farmers can sell into by increasing the number of abattoirs that are not in the ownership of supermarkets and foreign countries, we will ensure that farmers can enter the supply chain and improve the at-gate farm price, which is essential. I am surprised that my hon. Friend the Chair of the EFRA Committee did not have more of a pop at supermarkets, but I am sure that if we have a longer debate on this subject in future, he will.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon made a point about targets. All too often, we set targets that seem arbitrary. We have to come back with a food security report. I echo his call for a 75% target on food security in this country, and for that to be a target that we continually improve upon.

It has been surprising to me, in the time that I have been in this place, to see which Government Departments have moved out of London to locations across the country for one reason or another. If there is one Department that should not be based in London, it is DEFRA; it needs to be either alongside some of our agricultural colleges, or in a rural location, where it can work with those who are likely to go into farming or fishing, or to be land managers, or with the academics who spend time talking about this issue. If we hope to encourage people to go into farming, we need to ensure that we are listening to the people who will actually do the farming. That would help the policy that we are trying to put forward, and it would mean that we realised that Whitehall mandarins—I hope that any

who are watching will forgive me—do not always know what is right for rural areas, and what we need in our constituencies.

Of course, I would say that south Devon is the perfect place for DEFRA, but I am sure that we can all make that point about our area later. There is a real need to make sure that our local agricultural colleges and those people who are going into farming and fishing have experience of, and hands-on time to get involved and engaged with, DEFRA and policy making. I would be very interested to hear from the Minister on how she is engaging with that. I know that there are initiatives and schemes, but they need to be far more widespread across the United Kingdom.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon made points about exports and how we can promote British food and drink. We already do so to a degree, but I wholeheartedly agree that we can do it more successfully. We are able to say that the produce we are promoting around the world is some of the finest in the world.

We are about to sign a trade deal with Australia, and hopefully will soon sign one with New Zealand, as well as the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. When we sign our trade deals, we should talk about the fact that our produce meets some of the highest welfare standards and is of the highest quality. That produce will be in demand, but it needs financial support, and DEFRA and the Department for International Trade must ensure that they promote ways to get it abroad.

We have heard from lots of right hon. and hon. Members about the opportunity that exists. What matters is recognising the opportunity. All of us agree that we are moving in the right direction, but we need to seize on the new opportunities, provide clarity, stability and—where possible—funding, ensure that we are working hand-in-glove on policy development, and move on from there.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I call Luke Pollard to speak; I appreciate that he has not been here for all of the debate, but he apologised to me on arriving and gave me a very good reason why he was late.

10.24 am

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Betts.

I thank the right hon. and learned Member for Torridge and West Devon (Sir Geoffrey Cox) for his speech. The Cabinet and the courtroom’s gain has been our loss in years of farming debates, because what he said here is the argument that Labour Members have been prosecuting against the Government for many years. If only we could have afforded his counsel and his wise words along the way! We might then have been more successful in persuading the Government to back British farmers with actions, not just words.

I declare an interest: my little sisters are farmers in north Cornwall. They have had a tough time in the past few days, as have farmers right across the country, coping with Storms Dudley, Eunice and Franklin. I thank them and all farmers for looking after our rural communities, and especially the farm animals that have been rather blown around in the past few days.

[*Luke Pollard*]

I back British farming. We need to buy local more. Devon and Cornwall produce some of the finest food in the world. We should be enormously proud of the production and the methods, as well as the stewardship of the production of the brilliant food that comes from our region. If we are to make it real, we need buying British to be a headline Government policy that is actually implemented and reported on each and every year.

I support the measures that my neighbour, the hon. Member for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter), proposed on growing British more. I have advocated for such a policy from the Front Bench, and I am sure that the shadow Farming Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), will do so in a moment. We could aim for a target of 75% by 2040, to match the NFU's net zero target, but we need to look seriously at how we do this. This is not "dig for Britain" nostalgia, but a hard-headed investment in our rural communities. It is a job creation exercise. At times of international instability, food security is a national security issue, and we should be unafraid to call it that.

Far too often in the past few decades, food policy has been exported and privatised through the supermarkets. We need to take back control of food policy, and talk about high standards, proper wages, proper decency and the environmental gains. We have not been doing that, but I hope the Minister will listen to the cross-party concerns raised here. Whatever colour rosette we wear at elections, the argument is the same: the Government have not been seizing the opportunities presented by Brexit to make a fairer, decent, greener and healthier farming system for our rural communities. They need to do so.

I worry that the opposite is true. I have spoken about this before, and I do not apologise for saying it again: I think there is a Government strategy to reduce the number of farmers in our country—to have smaller farms aggregated into larger farms, with more use of technology, gene editing and more industrialised methods. That may work in the east of England, but it does not work in the south-west. One practical reason is that our small country lanes will not be able to cope with larger farm machinery going through there, but actually, the preponderance and concentration of small family farms, not with huge acreage, but with a passion and a stewardship of the countryside that we should be celebrating, needs to be preserved.

It is not possible to have growth in British production at the same time as the Government are signing trade deals that undercut our farmers. Those deals send the message to farmers, whether Ministers think it is accurate or not, that their industry and the value they create is not worth it—the Government will sell them out in hopes of a trade deal. The Australia trade deal is the model that all future trade deals will follow, and it is a betrayal, baked into a trade deal that the next Government will not be able to wriggle out of. This is a generational betrayal of British farming, and we should be unafraid to call it out.

The south-west is a brilliant place for farming. We have some brilliant farmers in our region, which produces more food than Scotland and twice as much as Wales. In our region, agriculture contributes twice as much to the economy and generates twice as many jobs as it does

in the average English region. The agricultural sector in the south-west directly contributes £1.6 billion to the national economy and employs 60,000 people. In Devon, agriculture and food production accounts for 13% of the county's economy—almost double the national average. The renaissance in farming that we require needs to be shared right across the country.

I share the concerns raised by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) about environmental land management schemes. They are not working in the way they need to. There is not the clarity or the confidence that farmers need if they are to undertake them. Nor is the sustainable farming incentive working. The Government need to look at the system again, because confidence in it has not been created.

Like Plymouth Argyle against Chelsea, DEFRA was off to a winning start at first. Rewarding farmers for public goods was a good principle that enjoyed cross-party support: the problem is that the practice does not match the ambition that we first came out with. I want DEFRA to be stronger on this, because there is a real case, which has been advocated on a cross-party basis, for looking again at phasing down direct payments and the speed with which they are being phased down. We need to make sure that our farmers are not being forced out of business, because there is a genuine risk that if they are forced out of business, our countryside—that immense rural fabric, that green and pleasant land that we so value—will be eroded. The second home penetration into our rural communities is a real issue. We need a concentration on first homes, not second homes, but those communities are being hollowed out. It is unaffordable for many people to live in rural communities; it is unaffordable for many people to work on a farm in a rural community, because they cannot afford to live there. That issue also needs to be addressed through a proper long-term plan.

The final thing I want to say is about tenant farmers, because the implications of the Government's changing agriculture policy are felt the most by those farmers, who do not have security of tenure of their lands or ownership opportunities. We know that absent landlords are putting up rents for tenant farmers. We know that tenant farmers, in particular, face the toughest time when it comes to making their businesses work, and I would like the Minister to make a specific effort to build up support for tenant farmers and make sure that the measures she is introducing do not inadvertently affect them. We have an amazing farming sector in the south-west, and I want that to continue, but to do that, we need the Government to do different things from what they are doing at the moment. Having the soundbites, but not the action, will not achieve that, so I hope the Minister listens to the cross-party agreement on what is going wrong and what should be happening in its place.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I call Simon Jupp. I will start the wind-ups at 10.39, so I ask the hon. Member to make sure he keeps his eye on the clock.

10.32 am

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): Thank you, Mr Betts; that is much appreciated. I also thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Sir Geoffrey Cox) for securing this morning's debate.

The south-west, particularly Devon and Cornwall, is proudly at the centre of the UK's food and farming industry, as we have heard this morning. Our whole region is proud of the produce we produce: we should shout about it far and wide, and perhaps we do not do enough of that at the moment. We are an integral part of the UK's agricultural and economic output and employment. It does not need saying that the value of farming output in the south-west was £4.1 billion in 2019, which is an incredible figure: more than Scotland, and more than twice as much as Wales. Two thirds of all dairy products exported from the UK to the US are from the south-west, even though the south-west is home to just one third of England's cattle—that is a really interesting statistic.

Devon's farmers play a key role in the life in the county that I grew up in and am proud to represent a part of. Many residents of our county get a snippet of this at the annual Devon County Show, held in my constituency of East Devon, but all year round, farmers are the custodians of our countryside. They create new habitats, protect wildlife, produce the raw ingredients that feed our nation, and export that food around the globe. As diverse businesses, they offer accommodation to tourists and visitors coming to the best bit of Britain. Almost 20,000 people work in the food and farming sector in Devon: that is 13% of the county's economy, compared with 8% nationally. As my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) has highlighted, the south-west also has a major fishing sector, with the region totalling 10% of all fishing output, second only to Scotland.

Overall, I support the Government's position of maintaining high UK food and animal welfare standards, and shifting from the bureaucratic EU cap towards ELMS that will improve our environment and encourage consumers to buy British. However, since being elected I have spoken to many farmers in my corner of the south-west, East Devon, as well as the National Farmers Union and others. I always insist to them that the Government should be in listening mode, but that communication must go both ways, and it does not always feel that way. Farming is a seven-days-a-week job, and those farmers deserve to be productive, successful and profitable. While Britain is now free to independently strike new trade deals across the world, that should not come at the expense of high-quality and popular produce from East Devon that rightly deserves our support.

Some of the best British food and produce is also the cheapest: it is seasonal, it is local, and it has not travelled across the planet to get to our shelves. We are still awash with local greengrocers, corner shops, farmers markets, fishmongers and butchers across vast swathes of the south-west, and they need our support more than ever. We cannot afford to lose them from our towns and villages and, crucially, neither can our local farmers. That is why I share the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) about food standards. I am pleased that the Government listened and took the UK's high standards off the table of any trade deal. I particularly welcome the Government's setting up the Trade and Agriculture Commission to advise on and inform trade policies and deals. The commission is crucial, and it must continue to play a crucial role as we continue to take advantage of our newfound freedoms after leaving the European Union.

However, clarity for our industry is needed sooner rather than later. Farmers in my constituency believe there should be a clearer direction on the environmental land management scheme and on how payments for farmers will be measured following the end of the single farm payment. They believe that, at its heart, ELMS should keep encouraging farmers to produce food if we are to maintain 62% food self-sufficiency in the UK, and that the quota could and should be increased. Over recent years, one of the advantages of subsidised farming was that it gave the Government an element of control over farming. However, if payments are viewed as not worth the hassle, farmers will be more inclined to do their own thing. The benefits of the scheme, with all its good ideas, will not be felt and the positive impact, as intended, will not happen.

As we have heard, some farmers feel under increasing pressure from the Environment Agency, with farming rules for water making some farming systems unviable. There could be better practicalities surrounding the rules that should ultimately keep farmers making the best use of their manures. I am acutely aware that the Government should look to encourage the food and farming sector to recruit from the domestic workforce, with better pay and conditions wherever possible, now that we have left the EU. It is a theme that has been repeated throughout this morning's debate. However, sustained efforts by both the Government and the industry to encourage interest in such a career are long overdue, and the skills gap is a problem now—not in a couple of years' time, when the training has been completed. Places such as Bickton College in my constituency do a great job at helping to turn the situation around, but for many farmers it is too little, too late.

Although the seasonal visa schemes for the poultry industry helped plug the acute gap last year, I hope DEFRA can work this year with the Home Office on a long-term strategy for the food and farming workforce. One of the farms in my constituency produces the best turkeys in Devon—I would say that, wouldn't I? If it becomes clear again that it cannot get turkeys from farm to fork this Christmas without foreign labour, the Government must act quickly to help and not leave it until the last minute. The temporary visa scheme, which did not have many people sign up to it, represented a failure to back our farmers. Crucially, farmers need as much notice as possible.

The south-west is known not only for its food, but for its drink. It would be remiss of me not to mention the thousands of acres of orchards across the west country that produce some of the world's best cider and perry, which I have been known to enjoy from time to time—in moderation, of course. They support around 11,500 jobs. Recognising and supporting apple and pear growers is vital to protecting those world-class products, and I welcome the Treasury's measure in the Budget to cut the duty on draught beer, cider and sparkling wine. That is an example of how the Government have listened to our industry, but we can go further and faster.

Following the comments from my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes, it would be remiss of me not to talk about DEFRA and its hopeful move to Devon. South Devon is perhaps a little far—I suggest East Devon might be a more important and prominent part of our county.

[Simon Jupp]

Food and farming can continue to go from strength to strength, but the industry needs to have certainty in order to survive and then thrive. I am not sure it currently has that. People care more than ever about what is on their plate—the pandemic showed us that. We already produce the best. Let's make sure we keep the skills and expertise to keep it that way and grasp all the opportunities ahead.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I thank right hon. and hon. Members for their co-operation. The Front-Bench speakers will have 10 minutes each.

10.39 am

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Betts. What an interesting debate it has been. It was not exactly as I expected, and it started in Ukraine. I congratulate the right hon. and learned Member for Torridge and West Devon (Sir Geoffrey Cox) on his barnstorming performance and critique of the Government, which I almost entirely endorse. I would like to hear more of it, not least because of some of the important points that were made in general—not just about Devon and Cornwall. He made the point about the lack of impact assessment for the environmental land management scheme, for which we have been calling for a long time. As my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) pointed out, many of his points have been prosecuted by the Labour party right the way back to the passage of the Agriculture Act 2020. My hon. Friend also raised important points about pigs, which, as a Member from the east of the country, I am very aware of. I thought some of the comments from the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), were very perceptive, and I associate myself with them. This is a complicated issue, but I am afraid the Government have not covered themselves in glory on it.

The debate is timely because it is happening during the NFU conference, which some of us were fortunate enough to enjoy yesterday, not least the opening address from Minette Batters, who I think would join the case for the prosecution. She said that the Government have shown a

“total lack of understanding of how food production works”, introduced “completely contradictory policies” on farming, and risk “repeatedly running into crises” through the lack of a post-Brexit plan for UK farming. That is a pretty damning indictment of this Government's policies and position.

That is also what I hear from people in Devon and Cornwall. As I said, I am from the east, but I am delighted to have trips to that part of the country to hear from people. One of those trips—to see some of the ELMS pilots—was at the invitation of the Minister herself. Those pilots, as I have said before, were very interesting. I contacted one of the farmers whom I had been to see—Holly Purdey at Horner farm, which is an example of a small enterprise, just over the border from Devon—and she told me:

“Our dream is just to show that it is possible to create a positive integrated model of farming that means we can tackle the climate and the biodiversity crisis while producing nutrient dense food for our community”—

mixed farming. That is what this is about: a change back to a different form of production. Holly is able to do that, to some extent, through ELM, but many are finding it much, much tougher.

I suspect that many people here will know Robin Milton, the chair of the Exmoor National Park, who has hosted me twice—I am very grateful to him. Members who know him know that he has strong views and is not shy in coming forward with them. He is pretty appalled, frankly, about the effect that the transition to a different support system is having on the upland areas. He was quoted in *Farmers Guardian* last week as saying that the lack of suitable uplands support package was “reprehensible”. I suspect that that was reflected in some of the comments that we heard from the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). The Government will say that more is coming down the line and that there is more to do, but frankly, people are making decisions now. They have to live their lives, and they have to have some idea of what the next few months and years will bring. This is just not working for them.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport and the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale echoed in their points, I have also heard that tier 3 ELM in particular looks all too likely to become a scheme that rewards very rich landowners for carbon capture and storage. In the wider sense of the term, that is a perfectly attractive and good thing to do, but look at the cost in damage to food production and to some of our best agricultural land. The Secretary of State tried heroically to defend the position at the NFU conference yesterday, under tough prosecution from Minette Batters. I have to say that I am not sure that the audience was convinced, but the Minister has the opportunity to put on the record where the idea to split ELM into a third/a third/a third came from. The widely accepted view is certainly that that is what is going to happen, but it is clearly not what most people want. Will the Minister tell us whether the split will be 60/20/20 if that is what it ends up having to be?

The Secretary of State also had to deal yesterday with the extraordinary muddle that the Government seem to have created over some of the labour issues. I will not go into those in detail, but it seems that last week, the Home Office wrote to labour providers to say that they would have to pay a whole lot more—more than £12 an hour in general. As a Labour politician, I quite like higher wages in general, but that has to be done in a way that works and is viable for employers, as the Labour party's record shows. Many Cornish growers I have spoken to would really struggle to meet those kinds of rates. They had a tough enough struggle last year with much of the daffodil crop not picked and consequently not grown this year. Can we have it on the record from the Minister that, as the Secretary of State said last week, it was a mistake? Will the Home Office clarify that? After listening to the speeches this morning, I have to ask whether the Home Office is part of the same Government. The Conservatives seem to manage different parts of the Government as if they are not part of an overall whole. Well, they clearly are not. They work in completely contradictory directions. That is a strong message that I also get from farmers in Cornwall and Devon, because it appears that different Departments are doing completely contradictory things.

That makes no sense to people out there. They do not care which Department it is—it is the Government. The Minister is looking pained, and I understand her pain, but they need to get a grip.

Reference has been made to the interpretation of the farming rules for water by the Environment Agency—another example of muddle and contradiction. In his opening comments, the right hon. and learned Member for Torridge and West Devon seemed to suggest he was surprised that, after the escape from Brussels, this was happening. Had he never noticed that the British civil service has consistently gold-plated EU regulations over the years? There is a fundamental misunderstanding of the problems facing our country, and now we see the consequences. We need to get a grip of the way our own systems work, and I see no sign that the Government are capable of doing that.

Fishing was mentioned, so I will draw the Minister's attention to two of the current problems around our coastlines, including Devon and Cornwall's. There is huge upset around the Marine and Coastguard Agency boat checks. Those are important for safety, but driving people out of business is not the way to do it. In the last couple of weeks, there have been problems with the inshore vessel monitoring systems, where type approval has suddenly been withdrawn on one system. Perhaps the Minister can tell us what is going on.

Finally, I will turn to important points made about tenants and commoners. I am grateful to Jo Joseph and the 3F Group in the south-west for highlighting the concerns of commoners, who feel let down by the Government's not resolving some of the issues facing them. The points about tenancies are absolutely crucial. It is clear that in a complicated network of systems and negotiations, things are not working at the moment. A point was made strongly to me by a key producer that, in the end, people might be able to manage without a subsidy, but they cannot manage without land. If we lose access to land, we lose the food production.

The Labour party's approach would be very, very different. We would make, buy and sell more British food, exactly as my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport laid out a few minutes ago. We would also adopt a much more planned approach to land use to deal with the emerging range of problems so that we can maintain the rich and varied collection of family farms in Devon and Cornwall, which are so important in terms of not just food production, but quality of life, cultural heritage and tourism. They are the key to what makes those places so special, and they are too precious to lose.

10.48 am

The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis): I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Sir Geoffrey Cox), from whom I learnt so much in my days as his Parliamentary Private Secretary, on securing this really important and wide-ranging debate. I cannot pretend to be a Devon or Cornwall farmer, but I should declare my farming interests, which included, until 15 years ago—for the whole of my life before that—a very fine herd of pedigree South Devon cattle, of which we are inordinately proud in our house, so I feel I have at least some skin in this debate.

Too many points have been raised for me to cover them adequately here. I have ripped up the speech that I prepared and will do my best to address the points raised. I encourage Members from across the House to bring groups of farmers—by Zoom or in real life—to meet me or representatives of the RPA to talk through their concerns more fully. This is a period of change in agriculture, and change is difficult. We have to keep the lines of communication open. I will do my best to allay concerns now, but I am very keen to do that on a one-to-one basis at any point.

As the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) put it, producing food environmentally is at the heart of what we do as farmers. Many Members mentioned the importance of food security; the Government completely shares that concern. We have not previously had the opportunity to have this discussion in the context of what is happening in Ukraine, but I reassure Members that the food strategy White Paper will be published next month. Food and its production in the UK will be at the heart of that. I was gratified to hear what my hon. Friends the Members for East Devon (Simon Jupp) and for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) said about eating local, sustainable food. We can all do that as a small way of supporting British farming—so optimism, yes, but definitely not blind.

The impact assessments will be published in March. The pot of money available to farmers is the same. It will, however, be more targeted and used to support public goods. We have ambitious environmental goals, which are generally supported across the House. Farmers and fishermen want to help us to achieve those and we want to reward them for doing so. The sustainable farming incentive is piloted this year. We have seen the soil standard; that is going down quite well on the ground—ha, ha—with farmers.

The schemes are designed to be stacked, so the moorland standard is merely an assessment tool at the moment and it will be stacked with other schemes to ensure that farmers are adequately rewarded. That is part of a seven-year agricultural transition. We are one year in. This is new iterative policy making. Genuinely, things will change, and it is right that they do. We are working with about 4,000 farmers at the moment, who are testing our new policies in real life on real farms to see if they work. Where they do not work, we will change them.

I completely understand the angst expressed by Members from all part of the House, in greater or lesser measure, this morning. Farmers are dealing with this period of change and transition by voting with their application forms: 52% of farmers, including myself recently, are now in a countryside stewardship scheme. In those schemes, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon said, we have uplifted the payments significantly, by about 30%. They are well-rewarded, and the aim is that that group of farmers, who will probably be joined by many more this year, will go straight into the mid-tier of our new policies. That is not a complete solution but the interim solution while we get these policies absolutely right.

On tenant farmers, I hope the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) will be pleased to know that about a month ago we started a six-month working group—which is working hard already

[*Victoria Prentis*]

under the chairmanship of Baroness Rock, a well-known and vociferous tenant farmer—to make sure the policies work for them. We have been able to ensure that the SFI works well with three-year tenancies, which are the average, but we need to do further work to ensure that the higher-tier schemes are accessible and attractive to tenant farmers. I hope that Members across the House will take heart from what the Secretary of State said yesterday about how tier 3, the upper tier, may be particularly suitable for upland and moorland farmers.

It is a very difficult time for the pig industry. There is a complex problem, which I will not have time to go through, but I will talk about some of the solutions that we came up with at the pigs summit that we held the week before last. We had farmers, processors and retailers in one room. At times, the conversation was difficult, but it was frank and productive. What we as consumers can do is to interrogate continually where the pork we are eating comes from. Some 40% of the pork consumed in this country, much of it out of home, is not British; so please, I ask that when people go and have their pork pie for lunch, they ask where it comes from. We have a long-term problem with the pig supply chain. I have asked for that work to be done and regulatory changes to be worked up if necessary. If necessary, we will refer the whole issue to the Competition and Markets Authority. That careful fact-gathering work is going on at the moment.

We also need to work hard on the immediate problem in the pig sector. We have issued 800 butchers visas, for which there is no English language requirement. We are also encouraging producers very hard to use the skilled butcher route, which has been open to them since January 2021. I am pleased to say that in recent weeks 250 applications have been made by Cranswick and 100 by Karro under that route.

Daniel Zeichner: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Prentis: I had better make progress; I am so sorry.

Real progress has been made in that space. The slaughter incentive payment and private storage aid schemes, which we put in place at the end of last year at the request of the industry, have been improved, also at the request of the industry, with whom we work closely—I am leaving after this debate to talk to a big pig farmer.

Those schemes are now much more flexible, allowing the removal of the expensive parts of the pig—the bits that make the farmer money—with the rest of the carcase either frozen or destroyed. That is really helpful. We are doing granular work to clear the backlog. I met agri-banking leads this week, and we are trying to help where we can, including with farmers' mental health, as this is a very stressful situation. On farming rules for water, we are working with the Environment Agency, the NFU, tenant farmers and the Country Land and

Business Association. We will issue statutory guidance to the EA in March, when there should also be news on urea.

There is cause for optimism. We have been able in recent weeks to talk about three new, exciting schemes open to farmers. The animal health and welfare pathway was set out yesterday by the Secretary of State at the NFU conference. The farming resilience fund has already seen 1,000 farmers in Devon and Cornwall having one-to-one conversations over the kitchen table about how their businesses can adapt. The farming investment fund has received 695 applications from Devon and Cornwall. We listened and increased the fund from £17 million to £48 million, because farmers wanted to apply. Farmers are voting with their application forms; they want to be part of these new policies.

Many Members raised visas. We have had a seasonal agricultural workers scheme since the second world war. Last December we gave the sector clarity with an extension of that seasonal workers route: 30,000 visas available this year, with a potential 10,000 extra if we need them. Crucially, for some of the constituencies represented here, we were able to extend that to ornamental horticulture. Members will be pleased to know that 85% of DEFRA staff work outside London.

We should be lining up to buy British at home and abroad, and we are doing that with agrifood attachés and the new export council. I am thrilled that there will be pitchforks behind us as we make this agricultural transition, backing us all the way. I encourage hon. Members to enjoy Cornish pasties, clotted cream, Cornish Yarg, west country beef, Tarquin's gin and turkey from the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon, and to get with the programme.

10.58 am

Sir Geoffrey Cox: I am grateful for the Minister's response, which was, as I expected, a fighting performance. I encourage her to keep fighting; I know that those around me in Devon will support her. We will be her army; she needs only to point us in the right direction, light the blue touchpaper and retire. I thank all Members who have attended this debate and you, Mr Betts, for the extremely patient and civilised way you have governed us, though I hope we have not been too unruly.

I only congratulate the shadow spokesman, the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), on his superb historical amnesia. I recall spending five years, in long and arduous opposition, bashing my head against a brick wall, trying to get a Labour Minister even to know where Devon existed on the map. I seem to recall that it was a "leafy area" that could look after itself. The behemoth—the leviathan—of bureaucracy was invented by the Labour party, so let us not throw too many brickbats across the aisle.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered food and farming in Devon and Cornwall.

Teddington Police Station

11 am

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the sale and future use of Teddington police station.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I am very grateful to have been granted this short debate to discuss the future of the Teddington police station site in my constituency. The site is owned by the taxpayer and, I fear, is in the process of being sold off to the highest bidder. It is an important site of great concern and interest, not only to me, as the MP representing the area, but to local councillors and many hundreds if not thousands of local residents.

I want to set out the case to the Minister for why such scarce sites, which are already in public ownership, can and should be sold for a good return to the public purse while also being repurposed for important community uses and much-needed affordable housing. National policy legislation and guidance are apparently forcing the hand of London's Deputy Mayor for Policing to sell for best value, interpreted as the best offer available on the open market. I very much hope that the Minister will be able to provide some clarity on those points of national policy to the Mayor of London and his deputy so that Teddington police station can be sold for community benefit, not just to luxury housing developers.

I will start with a few words of background. Teddington police station was first earmarked for closure back in 2017, in response to falling police numbers. London's Deputy Mayor for Policing, Sophie Linden, confirmed the closure to me in August 2021. I wrote back to her—and, back in 2020, to the Metropolitan Police Commissioner—setting out the need for a local police base to serve the Teddington and Hampton Wick area, not least because we all hoped and expected to see additional police officers on our streets, as promised by the 2019 Conservative party manifesto.

While I accept that far fewer people now report crimes at police stations, having a visible and easily accessible base for local community police teams is important, and means that they spend more time on the beat than travelling. It is therefore very disappointing that Teddington police station has closed.

However, that decision has sadly now been taken, so the main question at stake is, what should happen to a publicly owned site in such a prime location—in the heart of Teddington, close to the railway station, shops, parks and a range of services? How can we repurpose a public asset for public good, in the midst of crises in both health and housing?

Park Road surgery, a popular and thriving GP practice across the road from the police station, is bursting at the seams. Its premises are not fit for purpose to serve its 13,000-strong patient list, which spans Teddington, Hampton Wick, Fulwell, Hampton Hill, and west and south Twickenham. The converted Victorian house can only suitably cater to a quarter of that number of patients and, to use the GP partners' own words, "Physical access is terrible".

Dr Nick Grundy and partners have been seeking a new home for over 10 years. The Teddington police station site would be ideal for a new surgery delivering health and community services fit for the 21st century,

enabling the practice to grow and meet the demand fuelled by recent developments in the area. This Government have committed to boosting GP numbers—something that we have yet to see materialise. However, in the hope that we will be seeing more GPs in Teddington for the rising demand, Park Road surgery desperately needs a new home.

The surgery's partners have, with support from the council, been working with a local housing association on a bid for Teddington police station. It includes 100% affordable and social housing, together with the new surgery that is needed. Homes in Teddington—recently voted the best place to live in London—are simply out of reach in terms of cost for many of the nurses, police officers, firefighters and other key workers who serve our local community. They are also out of reach for many young adults who have had the benefit of growing up in the area but are simply priced out of it. Week in, week out, my surgery and inbox are filled with people in desperately overcrowded or unsuitable social housing, on a waiting list that they will never reach the top of. A local housing needs assessment undertaken for Richmond Council last year found that the borough has a need for 1,123 affordable rented homes per annum. It achieves nowhere close to that figure.

Although the local authority has met its house building targets in recent years, it has fallen some way short of being able to secure 50% of those new homes as affordable, and the culprit is viability. Typically, developers pay top dollar for sites in sought-after areas such as Teddington, and then struggle to develop them as their over-ambitious plans cannot meet the demands of local planning policy. Scarce sites are left derelict: Udney Park playing fields, also in Teddington, is a case in point. That site was sold by a charity—believing the Mayor that it had to secure the very best price—thus attracting bidders with unrealistic views of what could be achieved on the site. It now lies unused and derelict, with community groups desperate to repurpose it.

Coming back to the police station, the bid from the local housing association, in partnership with Park Road surgery, stands little chance of being the highest bid when competing against luxury housing developers. Met Police property services, the Deputy Mayor for Policing, and the Mayor of London have all claimed in writing and verbally in meetings that they have a statutory duty to achieve best value. The Mayor's response to a written question from Liberal Democrat Assembly Member Caroline Pidgeon stated that

"MOPAC has a statutory duty...to secure value for money in the use of assets...In disposals, best value is normally most effectively demonstrated by an open market transaction...MOPAC has no powers to dispose of land at an undervalue to provide affordable housing."

Based on the legal advice secured by Richmond Council and expert advice from the House of Commons Library, I would like to challenge the legal and policy basis for that response by the Mayor. It is my belief that MOPAC does not have to sell to the highest bidder and can take community need into consideration, looking favourably on the local housing association and Park Road surgery bid.

MOPAC was established by the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011, and is a separate legal entity from the GLA. It does not appear to be defined as a local authority for the purposes of the Local

[Munira Wilson]

Government Act 1999, which imposed a duty to secure best value on local authorities, nor are there limitations equivalent to section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972, requiring land to be disposed of at best consideration. There is nothing on the face of the 2011 Act to secure value for money in the use of assets, as stated by the Mayor. In fact, the powers delegated to the deputy Mayor under that Act in relation to disposals appear to allow some discretion to dispose at an undervalue. As such, my first question to the Minister is whether he agrees that there is no statutory duty on the face of the PRSR Act 2011 to secure value for money in the use of assets.

MOPAC is obliged by virtue of section 17(4) of the 2011 Act to have regard to the revised financial management code of practice issued in 2018. The guidance stresses the importance of securing value for money, but that does not amount to a specific, positive requirement to dispose at full market value, so my second question to the Minister is whether he agrees that the fiduciary guidance relevant to MOPAC does not impose a specific requirement to dispose at market value.

Furthermore, the Government gave a general consent in 2003 for local authorities to dispose of land at below market value. That consent stated explicitly that it applied to the Metropolitan Police Authority, which was MOPAC's predecessor body. The conditions for a sale below market value include where the land is likely to contribute to the promotion or improvement of economic, social, or environmental wellbeing. I contend that the local housing association and Park Road surgery bid fulfil those criteria. My third question to the Minister is: does he consider this general consent to apply to MOPAC?

Time is fast running out on the decision about the future of Teddington police station. Bids have already closed and they are being reviewed as we speak, as it is MOPAC's intention to secure the proceeds of the sale by the end of the financial year. The deputy Mayor claims that this money is desperately needed for frontline policing. I would suggest to the Minister that the money for that should be coming from the Home Office rather than from property developers.

The Mayor of London has responsibility for the Met, as police and crime commissioner for the capital. However, he also has a responsibility for housing, and a stated ambition to build 30,000 genuinely affordable homes over five years. He is rightly keen to see Richmond build more affordable and social housing, but land is very scarce in the borough.

The Mayor has previously called on the NHS to sell surplus land and buildings for housing and new GP surgeries. However, there is a complete disconnect in policy terms. A public asset, owned by the Met police, could be repurposed for a much-needed GP surgery and desperately needed affordable housing, for a good and fair price—albeit not the highest price available on the open market. Over 1,800 local residents have signed my petition in less than two weeks, calling on the Mayor to step in and prioritise the bid for affordable housing and the Park Road surgery over developers who can undoubtedly offer more money, but also offer an uncertain future for the site, likely to provide limited benefit to the local community. Together with the leader of Richmond Council, Councillor Gareth Roberts, I have written to the Mayor urging him to do the same.

Today I am asking the Minister to clarify the legislation and national guidance that MOPAC must adhere to, as set out in my three questions, when selling Teddington police station. I hope that he will acknowledge that there is no clear statutory basis for selling the site to the highest bidder, and clarify whether there is a dispensation in national policy to sell at below market value for the wellbeing of the local community. I urge the Minister to back my campaign for the future of Teddington police station.

11.12 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Neil O'Brien): I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) on securing this important and timely debate. I am in the unusual position of being able to say that I agreed with the broad thrust of the hon. Lady's comments, and that she is also correct in the points she made about the choices that MOPAC has. She has been a tireless and determined campaigner on the issue. She was against the original closure of the police station in her constituency, and I respect the way that she has thrown her weight behind this inspiring scheme to try and make it into affordable housing and a GP practice. The issue that we are talking about this morning has some wider implications.

I will go straight to the hon. Lady's questions. On the specific points about the disposal of land, section A4.15.14 of "Managing Public Money" provides advice to public sector organisations disbursing land and property assets. Crucially, any consideration of disposal of property should demonstrate that wider value for money considerations and transparency have been taken into account. The hon. Lady said that it was apparently the case that they had to sell only for best value, but we should be clear that there are choices.

Local authorities, including MOPAC and other police commissioners, have powers under section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972 to dispose of land in any manner that they wish. Councils and other public bodies should generally dispose of surplus land at the best possible price. However, there is no requirement that local authorities must dispose of land at the highest possible price in all circumstances. The Government recognise that disposing of land at less than best value can sometimes create wider public benefits, such as supporting the delivery of community initiatives or facilitating regeneration.

Where land is disposed of at an under-value, the approval of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is required, either through a specific application or under a general consent. At present, that general consent allows the disposal of general land held by local authorities at an under-value of up to £2 million. The police station may well be already covered by that general consent. To answer the hon. Lady's question, she is correct. If the under-value is less than £2 million, MOPAC would not need deluxe consent and would need only to demonstrate, if it was legally challenged, that the disposal supports economic, social or environmental wellbeing in the area.

As I listened to the hon. Lady, I thought that she made a very compelling case. Indeed, it is a belt-and-braces case, because she referred to the 2003 Act as well. The Government absolutely recognise that disposing of land at less than best consideration can sometimes generate those wider benefits.

Munira Wilson: I appreciate that the Minister may not know definitively at this point whether MOPAC is covered by that general consent. If he cannot put that on the record definitively now, will he write to me urgently to confirm whether that is the case, so that I can flag it up with the Mayor and the Deputy Mayor for Policing?

Neil O'Brien: I will write to the hon. Lady today on that exact point.

Let me turn to the wider issues that the hon. Lady raised. She powerfully advocated the views expressed by many of her constituents that the former police station should not be converted into luxury flats. We do not want to see London turning into a city full of luxury flats for millionaires; it needs to be a city that serves the whole community. That sentiment is widely felt across London and indeed beyond. The Government are clear that the answer to the problem is encouraging and increasing the supply of affordable homes across the board, and encouraging high-quality mixed developments. That is what we are delivering through the £11.5 billion affordable housing programme, which is part of the largest investment in affordable housing in over a decade.

The hon. Lady made the point that of course we all want to see additional resources going into our police as well and there are choices that MOPAC can make. However, it is worth putting that into some context. As part of our plan to recruit an extra 20,000 police officers, as of the end of last year the Metropolitan police had already recruited 2,121 additional uplift officers, and in 2022-23 the Metropolitan police will receive up to £3.24 billion, an increase of £164 million, or 5%, on the previous year's settlement. Yes, of course we want more resources to flow into the police, but they are already flowing from central Government.

We should be clear that there are choices for MOPAC. In my letter to the hon. Lady I will absolutely clarify and underline what I have said in the debate, namely that there are choices that MOPAC can make.

Munira Wilson: I decided not to pursue this point in my speech, but if the Minister is writing to me about the choices that MOPAC can make on funding, I must point out that it was very striking that, when the deputy Mayor wrote to me about the sale of the police station, she was very clear the money was needed for frontline policing—that the Mayor was funding an extra several thousand police officers—and to tackle violent crime. That suggested to me that there was a need to spend what is essentially a capital receipt on revenue activity. I hope the Minister can address that point, too, in his letter, regarding how that money should be spent if it is raised from the sale.

Neil O'Brien: I am very happy to add some of those points to the letter.

In the time remaining, let me touch on a couple of the wider issues that the hon. Lady mentioned. We are keen to support councils such as the London Borough

of Richmond to deliver on regeneration and more affordable housing. We are very keen to encourage more generally the reuse of suitable brownfield land and existing buildings for all kinds of environmental and social reasons. Across the country, we are increasing the assessment of housing need by 35% in our urban areas and supporting that with the £1.8 billion brownfield regeneration funding announced at the spending review. Also, we are trying to make it easier for things to change purpose.

The whole thrust of Government policy is in many ways towards more brownfield regeneration and more reuse, including for social reasons. We will match that with the actions we are taking through the £150 million community ownership fund to support the retention of local assets across the country. Therefore, as part of the wider thrust of Government policy, which is about regeneration and trying to encourage communities to hold on to and continue to use assets that are important to them, the vision the hon. Lady is sketching out is clearly in strategic alignment with what the Government are trying to do.

This case is clearly important to the hon. Lady's constituents. She and her community will feel a legitimate frustration when people say, "We don't have any choice, there are no options here. There is nothing we can do about it." It is clear to me, however, that there are choices. Given the context and the recent financial settlement for police and for local government, we are in a period of increasing numbers of officers and increasing funding. The hon. Lady's proposal for more affordable housing and for the regeneration of a building that is important to the wider community is absolutely in alignment with what the Government are trying to do.

I will endeavour to write to the hon. Lady as soon as possible to underline the points that I have made. I am conscious that, as she pointed out, the matter is subject to negotiations, even as we speak.

Munira Wilson: I thank the Minister for being so generous in giving way again. I may be pushing my luck here, but as well as writing to me, might I persuade him to write to the Mayor of London, or indeed to the Deputy Mayor for Policing?

Neil O'Brien: Let me mull on that exact point and come back to the hon. Lady. I am sure that she will certainly share more widely whatever I send her, and she is welcome to do so.

We have already established in the debate that there are some wider choices available to MOPAC. I am happy to put some of those in black and white for the hon. Lady if that is useful to her. I wish her the best in all her wider endeavours in supporting such community regeneration projects in her constituency.

Question put and agreed to.

11.22 am

Sitting suspended.

Muslim Community in Wales

[ESTHER McVEY *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Muslim community in Wales.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I am delighted to have the opportunity to open this debate on the Muslim community in Wales, and I am grateful to colleagues from across the House for being here today. The debate provides us, the elected representatives of the Muslim community in Wales—north, south, east and west—with the opportunity to say thank you, to acknowledge decades of commitment and contribution, and to show solidarity in these uncertain, divided and difficult times.

My constituency of Newport West, together with that of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), is the gateway to Wales. The city of Newport is home to the second largest number of Welsh Muslims, which is why I called this debate. Too often, too many people who make a great contribution go ignored—but not today. Today, we must all seize the opportunity to shine a light on the huge contribution made by Muslims all over Wales to our national life.

I will start by setting the scene and sharing the facts. In 2019, the Muslim population in Wales was estimated to be 55,400. That compares with the 2011 census estimate of 45,950. Welsh Muslims accounted for roughly 1.8% of the population of Wales in 2019, compared with 1.5% in 2011. The Welsh Muslim community is small in number but stands tall right across our national life. In terms of ethnicity, the 2011 census showed that the majority of Muslims in Wales were from families of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Arab origin; those three groups made up 62% of the Muslim population in Wales.

Thanks to the Library briefing for the debate, we know that the 2011 census showed that almost half of the Muslim population in Wales resided in Cardiff. The second largest number was found in God's own city of Newport; it was followed by Swansea, where I know my hon. Friends the Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) and for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) are active in championing the needs and concerns of the community. The data shows that 74% of Welsh Muslims reside in the three local authorities of Newport, Cardiff and Swansea. I know from my own area of Newport West what a brilliant contribution Muslims make to the life of our city. I know the same goes for Muslim communities across Wales.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted that my hon. Friend and neighbour has secured this debate. She will know that the first purpose-built mosque in Wales was in my constituency, but of course the heritage goes back much further, certainly to the mid-1800s for the Somali community. We also have a strong Yemeni community, as well as all the other communities that she mentioned. The community made a fantastic contribution during the covid pandemic, but it has done so over many decades.

Ruth Jones: My hon. Friend and neighbour is perfectly correct. We are stronger together, and the communities in his constituency and ours play a tremendous part in bringing about integration and social cohesion.

Newport's greatest strength is its diversity. I know from my visits to Jamia mosque on Commercial Road in Pill, the Islamic Society for Wales on Victoria Road, and Newport Central mosque in Stow Hill—the heart of our city—just what a contribution they have made to our local community. I also acknowledge the Hussaini Mission and Masjid at-Taqwa.

As I have said previously in the House, it is important to take a moment to acknowledge the key role our Muslim community has played over the last two difficult years. Those in the Muslim community were on the frontline as we worked our way through the pandemic. They looked out for their neighbours and provided food and support to people of all faiths and none. I saw in Newport West our Muslim community living its values, showing it cares and bringing our community together.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing the debate forward. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. I am here to offer my support for what she is trying to achieve. Does she agree that the key to true integration is the need for understanding—for communities to understand that strength is found in diversity—and that programmes such as those that she is outlining must be funded in the long term to raise a generation that sees that it is only community, and not differences in lifestyle or opinions, that is important?

Ruth Jones: Absolutely. I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. I also thank and commend him for the work that he does as chair of the APPG. It is so crucial that we ensure that we all work together—that those of all faiths and none can work together and worship together peacefully. I also want to say thank you to our Muslim communities for what they did in working with our council, our emergency services and many volunteers from across the communities in some very dark times.

In a debate at the end of last year that was called by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan)—I pay a warm tribute to him for all his work in standing up for British Muslims, and it is good to see him here today—I noted that a few years ago, the Muslim Council of Britain delved deeply into the most recent census statistics to get a picture of Islamic life in the United Kingdom. It found good stories to tell. Muslims are ethnically diverse; the level of segregation is starting to fall as Muslims move to all parts of the country to start a life and raise a family; a third of British Muslims are aged under 15, which is a higher proportion than for the population as a whole; and levels of educational attainment and ability are growing.

However, there were also challenges. Nearly half of Muslims live in the most deprived 10% of areas, while only 1.7% live in the wealthiest areas. Unemployment among Muslims is higher, health problems among elderly Muslims are more pronounced, and Muslim women face a challenge in balancing their work aspirations with the expectations of others. That challenge is something

that we must all take seriously and work together to overcome, and I look forward to hearing exactly what the Minister thinks that will look like in Wales.

A key part of meeting that challenge is ensuring that we all live by the value of proper and inclusive representation. I am firmly of the view that representation really matters. All parties in this House have a responsibility to ensure that Members of Parliament and our Senedd Members, councillors and party officials look like the country we want to serve.

I recognise that Natasha Asghar MS was the first BME—black and minority ethnic—woman and the first Muslim woman to serve in the Welsh Parliament. I know that representation is a real focus of the First Minister and leader of Welsh Labour, Mark Drakeford. We must support—with our votes as well as our words—more members of ethnic minorities to stand for the Senedd, for this House, and of course in town halls and civic centres across Wales and, for that matter, across the United Kingdom.

On that note, I pay tribute to my colleagues in local government in the city of Newport and in my constituency of Newport West. I am thinking of people such as Councillor Miqdad Al-Nuaimi, who represents Stow Hill, and Councillor Ibrahim Hayat, who currently represents the industrial heartland of Newport and our docks in Pill. I am also very grateful that the first Muslim mayor of Haringey, Councillor Adam Jogee, works with me in this place. He works every day to deliver for the people of Newport West.

I am very conscious of the important role that the city of Newport plays as home to the second largest Muslim community in Wales. That is why, since my election to this place in 2019, I have regularly raised issues around religious freedoms and the importance of tackling Islamophobia. I have also looked to ensure that the needs and voices of Welsh Muslims, particularly in my constituency of Newport West, are heard loud and clear. Islamophobia affects Muslims in Wales and across the United Kingdom, and we in this place have a particular and real responsibility to call it out. Islamophobia is a pervasive hatred targeted and directed at a particular section of our society. It manifests itself in violent hate crimes, targeted discrimination and the loss of opportunities for many Muslims, in Wales and across the nation.

It is vital that this House acknowledges that Islamophobia is on the rise in Britain. Year after year, British Muslims are victims of the highest proportion of religiously motivated hate crimes, which is a stain on us all. Frankly, this trend shows no sign of abating under this Conservative Government; I am interested to hear what the Minister will say about that when he responds to the debate.

I am proud that Welsh Muslims will benefit from a Labour party that has adopted the definition of Islamophobia set by the APPG on British Muslims, and that took proactive steps to tackle this vile form of racism and hatred by adopting a new code of conduct on Islamophobia last year.

Stephen Doughty: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for being so generous in giving way again. I totally agree with and endorse the points she has made about Islamophobia. Regrettably, despite the wonderful communities that we have locally, we have seen some terrible incidents, which have been raised with me by

members of the community. Does she agree that we need to do specific work to target the rise of the far and extreme right? We have seen some horrific incidents in my own constituency and elsewhere, so we need to work together with law enforcement agencies, with counter-terrorism forces and—crucially—with those in education to tackle the rise of far and extreme right ideology in the UK.

Ruth Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his important intervention. He is quite right that education is key and that we must work with the enforcement agencies. I pay tribute to organisations such as HOPE not hate, which has also done some brilliant work in this area.

However, I want to press the Minister, because the Conservative party is the only major political party that continues to refuse to adopt the APPG's definition of Islamophobia. Even the Scottish Conservatives have done so. I know that the Minister for Brexit Opportunities is not a fan of the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), but I suggest that, on this issue, he follows the lead of the Scottish Conservatives.

With the Muslim community in Wales in mind, Labour committed to implementing the Labour Muslim Network's recommendations when they were published, and has adopted new codes of conduct on Islamophobia and anti-black racism. Those codes were developed with groups such as the Labour Muslim Network, the Runnymede Trust, the Labour BME staff network, and the Diversity Trust, to ensure that they have the trust and confidence of all across the United Kingdom.

It is important that we monitor hate crime. The charity Tell MAMA, which does excellent work, reported a 40% increase in online Islamophobia last year after the far right peddled false narratives blaming British Muslims for spreading coronavirus. That is why this debate is so important; the abuse is not just verbal or physical but structural, and in many ways it is entrenched in our society. As parliamentarians, we have a real responsibility to shed some light and tackle it head on, and that starts by talking openly and honestly about it.

We know that elected officials of the Muslim faith are targets for online bullying and Islamophobia. I am very clear that all abuse directed at Muslims in public life in Wales—or, indeed, any other part of our country—is completely unacceptable, as is all abuse towards all Muslims because of who they are, how they pray, and the way they lead their lives.

It is a matter of deep regret that hon. Members of this House have had some of the most horrendous abuse directed at them simply because of their faith. I think, most notably, of my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton, and, of course, Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London. It is last important to say a word about the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), who, as a Muslim woman in Parliament, faced the most disgraceful treatment from the very top of Government. All Muslim colleagues—irrespective of party affiliation—in public life, at home in Wales and across the United Kingdom, have my full and total solidarity.

As I lead this debate and express my solidarity with the Muslim community in Wales, I want to be crystal clear about my support for the APPG's definition of Islamophobia. I would be grateful if the Minister would

[Ruth Jones]

do the same when he winds up the debate. He is very welcome to intervene now if he wants to, or he can reassure me at the end.

My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton called a debate during Islamophobia Awareness Month. The House saw a very disappointing performance from the Minister that day, which is why I secured this second debate. Back in November, I asked a number of questions that covered issues affecting the Muslim community in Wales, but I did not receive adequate answers. I am confident that the Minister will be able to answer those questions today.

Can the Minister explain how the fight against Islamophobia was included in the last National Hate Crime Awareness Week programme? Has he met the leadership of the Muslim Council of Wales? If so, when did that meeting take place—and if it did not, why not? How many members of Her Majesty's Government have met the current secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain? A number of local authorities in England have established hate crime delivery groups. What assessment has the Minister made of the effectiveness of such groups, and what financial support will the Government provide the Welsh Government to develop them? I hope that the Minister will answer those specific questions today.

This debate is an opportunity for all of us to share our local stories, our connections, and any examples of the immense contribution made by the Muslim community in Wales. I am looking forward to hearing from colleagues who represent constituencies right across Wales, but I felt that it was important to speak the hard truths and not run away from reality. I called this debate because we must do more; we must go further in standing up for and proudly ensuring that the needs of Welsh Muslims are heard loud and clear by this Government.

I want to pay tribute to all Welsh Muslims, and the groups and organisations that support them, for the work that they do to bring Wales together, and for making our country great. To all our Muslim colleagues in this House and in the other place, I say: thank you for persevering and for showing grit, grace and determination in the face of some horrendous abuse. And to the Muslim community in Newport West and across Wales, I say: thank you, and please know that in me you will always have an ally.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I see that a good number of colleagues want to speak, but I will not introduce a time limit just yet. We will go to the Front Benchers no later than 3.40 pm, and obviously Ruth Jones will wind up the debate.

2.44 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) on securing this debate and giving us all an opportunity to put on the record our thanks to the Muslim communities in our constituencies. I apologise that I have to leave before the end of the debate, but I thought it important to take part. I am glad that my

hon. Friend said it was a chance to tell stories about our local areas, because I want to take the opportunity to put on the record my recognition of communities in Newport East, and in Newport as a whole, which we share.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, the Muslim community in Newport numbers nearly 7,000, including a significant population of Bengalis, Pakistanis, Kurds and other ethnicities, in and around both of our constituencies. The Harrow Road and Hereford Street mosques in Maindee, and the nearby IQRA community centre on Corporation Road, are important hubs for a community proud of its faith and heritage, and equally proud to be Welsh and Newportian.

I want to highlight a few examples of individuals and groups who exemplify the values of a community that continues to play such a vital role in the social, economic and cultural life in the city of Newport and the wider area. My constituent Dr Kasim Ramzan and his colleagues at Muslim Doctors Cymru have helped lead the drive to ensure take-up of the vaccine by local ethnic minority communities, which were hit hard by covid-19, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. The efforts of Dr Ramzan and his colleagues were instrumental in ensuring that the Jamia mosque, in my hon. Friend's constituency of Newport West, opened its doors as a community vaccination centre; it was the first mosque in Wales to administer the vaccine.

My constituent Fatma Aksoy, a pupil at St Julian's high school, was recently elected a member of the Welsh Youth Parliament for Newport East. Fatma, whose family is Kurdish, is a great advocate on issues including environmental protection, young people's mental health and the rights of the Kurdish community around the world. She is proudly learning Welsh, on top of the four other languages she speaks fluently, and is undoubtedly one to watch in future. The Muslim community in Newport East is one of the hotbeds for up-and-coming Welsh political talent. I urge politics watchers to keep an eye out for the likes of Farzina Hussain, Shah Alom, Ruqia Hayat, Abul Chowdhury and Asum Mahmood, all of whom are standing for election to Newport City Council in May in Newport East.

In the world of business, the Minister will recognise that companies such as Euro Foods, which has a branch in Newport as well as headquarters in nearby Cwmbran, are vital cogs in the local economy. Indeed, Euro Foods is one of the UK's largest food suppliers to the restaurant and takeaway sector, and the owner lives in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West. Newport East is also home to many small businesses owned by the Muslim community. I will mention Mango House in Magor, as it has previously been nominated for an award in this place. There are too many to mention today, but I recognise the long hours that the owners of those businesses put into serving their community throughout the pandemic.

On that theme, I want to pay tribute to the UK Islamic Mission team in Newport, who run a monthly food distribution programme helping vulnerable residents of all backgrounds and faiths, with food packages delivered from the IQRA mosque. I also pay tribute to Rusna Begum, who runs KidCare4U, a charity based in Newport that helps families develop through education, health and integration.

In the world of sport, great strides are being made with Exiles Together, a Newport County AFC supporters' group, founded by Jalal Goni, which aims to engage members of the BAME community in sport, and in particular in Newport County, through the promotion of equality and cohesion. That is a great initiative and the group continues to go from strength to strength.

On the theme of community cohesion, I also want to put on the record my thanks to staff and volunteers at Bawso, the Gwent Association of Voluntary Organisations, the Welsh Refugee Council, the Sanctuary Project and the Red Cross in Newport. They undertake fantastic work with the Muslim community in Newport to provide advice services, which have been more valued than ever during the past two years. Those organisations work closely with my office and, in particular, Sarah Banwell, my caseworker, who is very well known in the community. The same is also true for Eton Road, a multi-faith, multicultural hub, where the Muslim community works hard, hand in hand with the Presbyterian church, as an example of Newport at its best.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West said, the Muslim community in Newport, in Wales and across the UK still experiences hostility and discrimination from an intolerant minority. Indeed, nearly half of all religious hate crimes in England and Wales target Muslims. My hon. Friend highlighted how Islamophobia is on the rise, and it would be good to hear from the Minister some responses to her questions.

Good work is being done to tackle Islamophobia, which sadly does exist. I thank Gwent police, the Welsh Government, our local authorities, our schools and third-sector organisations such as Show Racism the Red Card for their active work in countering Islamophobia where it persists and in providing the education and resources needed to stamp out bigotry. The Muslim community continues to make an important contribution to the rich cultural life of Newport, and to exemplify our city's proud history of diversity, which is one of its characteristics and one of our greatest strengths. We have seen that in action through the warm welcome that has been given to refugees over the years, most recently to those fleeing Afghanistan. Long may that continue.

2.51 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) on securing this important debate and on her excellent speech and questions. I hope to add a couple more questions for the Minister.

I also recognise the invaluable work and contribution of the Muslim community in Wales and, indeed, of all our faith communities across the UK. The most recent report by the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims showcased the incredible and selfless contribution made by Muslims during the pandemic. The Muslim Council of Wales carried out excellent work with local mosques in Wales, providing essential supplies in their districts, which is a great illustration of Islamic teachings in practice. As a Muslim, I lean towards my faith in times of hardship for spiritual guidance and, most importantly, because it teaches me core principles and values such as empathy, stewardship, equality and fairness, which I strive to implement in my work as an MP.

To my great sadness and regret, however, Islamophobia is rampant in our society and beyond. It manifests in violent hate crimes, targeted discrimination and lost opportunities for many Muslims. The Government's own figures reveal once again that Muslims have been victims of the highest proportion of all hate crimes committed in the last year in England and Wales. It is no surprise, then, that our major political parties are not immune from the stain of Islamophobia.

The Labour Muslim Network report on Islamophobia made difficult and sober reading. It outlined that one in four

“Muslim members and supporters have directly experienced Islamophobia in the Labour Party.”

As chair of the Labour Muslim Network, I had encouraging meetings with the general secretary, the leadership and the party chair on taking swift action. It was agreed that all the report's recommendations would be implemented, and last year the Labour party introduced a new code of conduct to handle internal complaints on Islamophobia. By approving the new independent complaints process, the Labour party acted decisively and showed that it is and always will be the party of equality.

The Labour party was one of the first to adopt the definition of Islamophobia by the APPG on British Muslims. That definition has the confidence of more than 800 organisations, and has also been adopted by the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National party, the Green party and even, as has been said, the Scottish Conservatives, as well as the Mayor of London, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, and hundreds of councils across the country. I applaud the aforementioned for taking that positive step—defining and naming a problem is the first step in rooting it out.

All that stands in stark contrast to the Conservative party, which has repeatedly shown that it is in denial about Islamophobia through its failure to accept the definition proposed by the APPG; its failure to conduct a truly independent investigation; its failure to implement the recommendations of the Singh review; and its failure to appoint Government advisers for this issue. What concerns me is that the Tory party has an institutional problem. In light of the shocking accounts that the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) gave of her own experience of Islamophobia within the Conservative party, those institutional failings are clear for all to see. When a Muslim woman raises a direct experience of Islamophobia and discrimination at the heart of Government and her party, those allegations must be treated with the utmost seriousness and investigated immediately. This is by no means an isolated incident: former Conservative MEP Sajjad Karim detailed his own experience of Islamophobia, and despite raising it within the party, he is still waiting for a response two years later. This is hardly a zero-tolerance approach.

The Singh review, published last year, revealed the extent of institutional failings within the Conservative party in its handling of Islamophobia complaints. That review was also a damning indictment of the prevalence of Islamophobia within the Conservative party. Its terms of reference were widely criticised for being too narrow, and the review itself failed to engage with Conservative Muslim parliamentarians. Will the Minister commit to implementing the recommendations of the Singh investigation in full? Will he also follow in the

[Afzal Khan]

footsteps of the Labour party and take tangible steps to tackle Islamophobia in Wales and the rest of the UK? Adopting the APPG definition is a good starting point. Can the Minister finally deliver on his party's promise to conduct a truly independent investigation into the Conservative party, demonstrating that the Government take the issue of Islamophobia seriously?

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I allowed Afzal Khan to carry on giving his speech because it was important to get it on the record. It was out of scope of the debate today, but I did feel that he should have the time to get it on the record. Maybe it is for a future debate as well.

2.57 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms McVey, and I offer my warm congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) and, of course, as-salaam alaikum. It is a great pleasure to represent a large Muslim community in Swansea West: the Muslim community in Swansea is largely in Swansea West. Incidentally, there is an issue around the Boundary Commission proposals that would split it in half, which I am hoping will be resolved. As is the case elsewhere, the Muslim community is largely of Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Arabic but also African descent, and indeed there are some white Muslims. We are very much a community of communities in Swansea, and the Muslim community provides public service in our hospitals and our schools. Muslims serve in retail, manufacturing and hospitality: it is an integrated environment, and we rejoice in our similarities as well as our differences.

As other speakers have mentioned, the pandemic disproportionately hit certain groups who perhaps had less money or more forward-facing jobs, or were more congested in accommodation. We therefore saw a differential outcome in terms of infections, which we should learn from in future. We also saw a differential impact in terms of educational opportunities, because people from Muslim backgrounds often may not have English as a first language: there is a digital divide there. Again, the Welsh Government took that issue up, trying to focus support on people who were less well off, which included the Muslim community. It should be said that the Muslim community do better than the average in terms of educational outcomes, both in higher and lower education, but they start from a position of less economic strength. Therefore, we had this differential problem.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group on speech and language difficulties, which obviously looks at all groups, and we found that people with difficulties with speech and language—those from poorer backgrounds in particular but also those who have English as a second language—have differentially suffered from the lockdowns. There needs to be focused support on catch-up in that respect.

Since 2010, the Government's mantra has been austerity. Sadly, that has translated into a flatlining economy, and politically that can translate into more racism, as frankly the Brexit debate did. People who have very little money, as we see a growing cost of living crisis, suddenly want someone to blame, and sometimes that blame is focused on people who are different from them. We are, of

course, talking about the racial discrimination that we see. As has been pointed out, half of all hate crimes are committed against the Muslim community.

I am pleased that in Swansea West we have the Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team. The organisation tries to avoid the extreme radicalisation of youth, whether they are from white backgrounds facing fascist radicalisation or, indeed, occasionally people who misunderstand the Islamic Scriptures and end up seeking a violent way forward. There are not a lot of examples in Swansea, partly because of the success of the Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team. I am pleased that its chief executive Rocio Cifuentes has been appointed the Children's Commissioner for Wales, and will help those children who may not have had the greatest opportunity to start from.

Hon. Members will be aware that Prevent is a system that attempts to prevent the emergence and continuation of terrorism. I have found, from engagement with the programme with Muslim imams and others, that its intrinsic problem is that there is a preconception in Prevent that if someone has too much Islam—like drinking and so on—they become too Islamic and then they become a fundamentalist. That is not the truth. The truth is that people who become fundamentalists and ultimately cause damage in various ways do it through a corruption of the Scriptures of Islam. After all, hon. Members may know that Islam is Arabic for "peace".

It is not about saying to people, "You've got too much Islam." It is about having clerics and imams engaging with and talking to people who may, in the extreme, have adopted the corruption of Islam, such as Isis, and say, as has just been pointed out, "Actually, Islam is about peace, equality, fairness and living together in harmony." That is an important point to get across. We all vividly remember the police officer who was killed outside the House of Commons. Sheikh Mohsen, an imam in Swansea, phoned me to express his sympathy and solidarity that we should be side-by-side as communities against any extremism, wherever it comes from and against whomever it is inflicted.

I am here to rejoice in Swansea as a city of sanctuary and in Wales as a nation of sanctuary for the Muslim community. Rather than suggestions of the Muslim community as some sort of victims, my experience is that they are very much part and parcel of the community, but they are also heroes of the moment. Mosques have come forward and provided food for people during the pandemic, as well as continuously doing so for homeless people and others. They have shown great leadership in doing so.

In particular, Mahaboob Basha, who I know personally, has done a lot on this issue and he got a medal from the Queen for his work. He is standing as a councillor, as it happens, and he stood, as did Riaz Hassan, in the Assembly elections. Aisha Iftikhar was another candidate in the past. There are a lot of people coming forward from the Muslim community to take up positions of public responsibility and who are giving back to the community and showing leadership. Today's debate is a great opportunity to thank them, and to say that we stand together in solidarity in difficult times, we are stronger together than apart and we will not tolerate those who breed intolerance and hatred.

3.4 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank everybody for their contributions, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) on securing the debate. I also congratulate colleagues who have spoken, including my hon. Friends the Members for Newport East (Jessica Morden), for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), as well as my constituency neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), who has made some interventions and who I know is also very busy with the Russian question today. I am sure my hon. Friends the Members for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) and for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) would both want to echo lots of the remarks that have been made about the positive contribution of the Muslim community in Wales.

I will not repeat the statistics that others have quoted about the Muslim community in Wales, but suffice it to say that the Muslim community in Cardiff has a very long history going back well over a century, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth mentioned earlier. There are particularly strong links because of Cardiff's maritime history, with sailors from Somalia and Yemen originally coming to Cardiff and settling in what was once known as the Tiger Bay area and now tends to be called Cardiff Bay, which is in my hon. Friend's constituency. There was a huge melting pot of cultures in Cardiff over 100 years ago. If one walked the streets of Cardiff, particularly near the docks in the south part of the city, one would have seen a recognisable and unique multiracial community. It was famous across the world for its diversity, with a large number of people of the Muslim faith living there.

As hon. Members have mentioned, the exciting melting pot of Cardiff produced a unique culture, but it has also produced problems over the years. We know there is nothing new about discrimination and Islamophobia. One of the first cases that I worked on when I worked for my predecessor, the former Member of Parliament for Cardiff West, Rhodri Morgan, involved a woman called Laura Mattan, who was from Ely in my constituency and whose husband, Mahmood Mattan, was a sailor from Somalia who came to settle in Cardiff. As a result of a gross and terrible miscarriage of justice in 1952, he was the last person to be hanged in Cardiff. Through the campaigning of Laura as a widow and the work of my predecessor Rhodri Morgan, that conviction was subsequently overturned. Indeed, she was the first person ever to receive compensation from the newly created criminal review board for a miscarriage of justice. There is no question at all that prejudice played a large part in the trial. Even the defence barrister for Mahmood Mattan referred to him as a "semi-literate savage" back in 1952. That was his own lawyer, so we have to be realistic. Even though we have a wonderful and marvellous history to celebrate in Cardiff, we also have to recognise that along the route there has been terrible prejudice, that Islamophobia is not a new thing, and that it still exists to this day.

However, we should also focus on the incredibly positive contribution that the Muslim community in Wales, and especially Cardiff, has made to our capital city. As well as the original Muslim population of Cardiff, who came from Yemen and Somalia, we have had in recent decades more Muslims originating from south Asia, particularly India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

I was very privileged a few years ago to travel with a group of Welsh Bangladeshis to Bangladesh and to visit Chittagong, Dhaka and Sylhet, where, as I am sure hon. Members will know, most British Bangladeshis tend to come from—they have fed us in restaurants for many decades. What an incredible experience it was to travel with British Bangladeshis back to Bangladesh and see the vibrancy. It is a poor country, but it is incredibly rich in culture and activity. Anyone who says that poor people are lazy should try visiting Bangladesh, because the incredible human activity and endeavour of the people of that country was inspiring to me as someone who had never visited a south Asian country before. It was an amazing experience.

As hon. Members have said, there are several mosques in Cardiff West. The Muslim community has made an incredible contribution during the pandemic, not just through charitable acts within the Muslim community itself, but reaching out to anybody who needed assistance, particularly the elderly. It was inspiring to see the way that the community has organised itself during the pandemic to help elderly people from all backgrounds around my Cardiff West constituency. They are proud to be Welsh Muslims—I know that because they tell me—and I am proud to have the privilege of representing that community in Parliament.

Stephen Doughty: I fully endorse my hon. Friend's comments about the links with Bangladesh. I recently had the chance to have a meeting with the Wales Bangladesh chamber of commerce and heard more about those links, which are absolutely fantastic. Does my hon. Friend agree that a number of Muslim-led and Muslim-majority organisations are doing fantastic work in education with young people? Some of our sporting organisations, such as Tiger Bay boxing club and Tiger Bay football club, which are in my hon. Friend's constituency, are not only delivering amazing sporting prowess in the community, but providing tutoring, education and inspiring mentorship for young people.

Kevin Brennan: I endorse everything my hon. Friend said and add that my constituency is also home to Glamorgan county cricket club. There has recently been controversy regarding racism in cricket. I am a member of the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and the chair of Glamorgan recently appeared before us to talk about some of those issues. Glamorgan is based at Sophia Gardens and has one of the largest Muslim communities in the country—certainly in Wales—on its doorstep at Riverside.

By the way, Riverside is on the west of the river, but the Conservative party does not seem to have noticed that in its proposals on boundary changes, and they somehow want to move part of the west of Cardiff to the other side of the river. We will have to fight them tooth and nail on that, because that is where the heart of the Muslim community is in my constituency, in Riverside, on the west bank of the River Taff, which is the major geographical boundary in Cardiff and should be respected by one and all. Hopefully, the Welsh Conservatives will revisit that crazy idea as the Boundary Commission hearings go on.

Before you tell me off, Ms McVey, for straying too far from the subject of the debate, I want to say that I am proud to represent the Muslim community in Cardiff West and across Wales. As others have done, I praise the

[Kevin Brennan]

political contribution that the Muslim community make to all political parties in Wales. With the retirement of Councillor Ramesh Patel, who has made an incredible contribution, I am pleased that Welsh Labour has selected Jasmin Chowdhury as the candidate for Canton ward, where I live. I wish all candidates well, but particularly her, in the forthcoming local elections in May.

However, there is one Muslim constituent that I am missing at the moment, and he is a young man called Luke Symons. Like many people from Cardiff, he has a family background linked to the history I talked about earlier and linked to Yemen. A few years ago, Luke travelled to the middle east in search of his roots and ended up looking up his family in Yemen. He converted to Islam and married a local girl. Sadly, five years ago Luke was detained at a Houthi checkpoint, having tried to flee the country when civil war began. For the last five years he has been held by the Houthis in Sanaa, without trial and without being accused of any offence.

I appeal to everyone here to support Luke and his family. His marvellous grandfather, Bob Cummings, whose background was as a merchant navy man, has campaigned tirelessly to get Luke released. I appeal to the Minister, in particular the Wales Office Minister, to put pressure on his colleagues in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to do more about Luke's case.

It is completely wrong that the Foreign Secretary picks and choose which families to meet of the British detainees who are held overseas without any justification. She and her predecessors have refused to meet Mr Cummings, Luke's grandfather. He has met with other Ministers, but he wants a meeting with the Foreign Secretary; other families have been granted that privilege. I think it is outrageous that he is discriminated against in this way, and that Luke's case is not given the priority it should be given by the Foreign, Development and Commonwealth Office.

Last year in Yemen, many hostages of many nationalities were able to be released. However, somehow or other, Luke, who should be taking his place in the Welsh Muslim community with his wife and child, was not got out at that time—while other nationalities were. Why is it that we as a country seem so poor at being able to get our people home in those circumstances, when other countries succeed in doing so? What is going on at the FCDO that means we have a terrible record in looking after our own citizens? I sincerely ask the Minister to take an interest in Luke's case, and put pressure on his colleagues in the Foreign Office to do two things. They should, first, do everything they possibly can to get him released so he can come and re-join the Welsh Muslim community in Cardiff and, secondly, put pressure on the Foreign Secretary to agree to meet with Luke's grandfather, Bob Cummings, so that he can put to her directly the impact this case is having on their family.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): We have certainly had a full debate today. I am now going to move to the Front Benchers.

3.16 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newport

West (Ruth Jones) on securing this debate. It has been a full and, on the whole, positive debate. As we have heard, Wales boasts a rich Muslim population; Islam is the largest non-Christian faith in Wales. Our Welsh-Muslim heritage is rich and vast, with the earliest recorded history dating all the way back to the early 12th century. The first mosque in Wales was built in our capital in 1947, and Wales now proudly houses 40 mosques, with 18 in Cardiff alone, including the South Wales Islamic Centre in Butetown, and others for Somali, Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities. There are seven mosques in Newport, and in north Wales there are ongoing plans to renovate an old chapel in Llanbedr into a brand-new mosque.

As we have heard, Cardiff is a modern, diverse, vibrant and cosmopolitan capital city, and is home to some of the oldest black and Muslim communities in the UK. These have roots dating back to the mid-19th century, as has been outlined by my hon. Friends the Members for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan). The history of Somalian-Yemeni seamen in Wales begins with the Somali migrants who arrived in the docks of Cardiff, Barry and Newport after the opening of the Suez canal in 1860. Somalia was colonised by the British Empire during the 19th century. At a time when Cardiff was one of the busiest ports in the world, Somali and Yemeni merchant navy men would travel on steamships from their home countries, transporting coal mined in the south Wales valleys around the world. Hundreds ended up settling in Wales and many families can trace their history back to the first seamen who settled there.

I had the pleasure of working in Cardiff during the 1990s and met many families in the Butetown and Grangetown areas, seeing for myself that they were diverse and vibrant communities. In the early 2000s, in another job, I worked in the city of Newport with charities and voluntary organisations, all of which received a huge contribution from the local Muslim community. We have heard about the Al-Ikhlâs centre in Adamsdale, in Cardiff central, that ran a food bank during the pandemic, as so many others have, and it continues to feed families across the city. Its staff helped in picking up prescriptions and shopping for those who have been shielding, again, supporting the most vulnerable in our community through difficult times. We saw so many examples of that throughout the recent pandemic. A similar food bank was set up at the Dar Ul-Isra mosque in Cathays that continues to operate. It also ran a covid-19 response to help the drive for personal protective equipment for NHS staff in Cardiff.

Notable elected representatives have been mentioned this afternoon, such as the Cardiff central councillor, Ali Ahmed, who, along with his team of volunteers, delivered food to staff at University Hospital Wales throughout the pandemic. Mosques across Cardiff, including Dar Ul-Isra, hosted pop-up covid vaccination clinics to play their part in Wales's record-breaking vaccine rollout. The Muslim community in Wales and right across the UK plays an important role in our communities and across national life. Much more needs to be done to highlight and celebrate that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West highlighted, the Muslim communities in Wales have made a crucial and integral contribution to Welsh history and public life. We should be proud of the part they have played in the development of our cities.

In opening this afternoon's debate, my hon. Friend highlighted the fact that Newport has the second largest Muslim community after Cardiff, as well as the contribution to national life that the Muslim community in Newport has made. It is important to recognise that contribution and that of elected representatives in local government, the Senedd and here in Parliament. She also highlighted the bullying targeted at the Muslim community, which is reprehensible. I will say a little more about that later.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) talked about the Muslim community, which is proud of its faith and heritage, and the role it plays in community life, which I recognise from my time working in Newport. Indeed, the first mosque in Wales to roll out the vaccine was in Newport. She also celebrated the diversity of candidates in the forthcoming elections—hopefully several new Muslim councillors will be elected—and the active work to stamp out bigotry across society.

My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) talked about the role of the Muslim community during the pandemic. He warned of violent hate crimes and gave a powerful account of what is needed, particularly in the Tory party, to tackle Islamophobia.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) talked about the impact of local lockdowns on the Muslim community and on higher education outcomes, often for people from disadvantaged communities. He also talked about the impact of austerity and Brexit, about how people who are different have often been blamed, and about the Prevent programme and its shortcomings.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) talked about the multiracial community across Cardiff, which dates back many decades, and about how discrimination is not new. Indeed, the terrible prejudices that we witness are, in way, historical. He talked about the contribution of the Bangladeshi community, particularly in Cardiff West and across Cardiff. He also spoke movingly about the plight of Luke Symons, who travelled to Yemen, and made a plea for a Government to do more in that case.

As we celebrate the contribution of the Muslim community, we must also recognise the challenges. We know that many Muslim families are subject to abuse, particularly on social media. As we know, social media platforms have a moral responsibility and a duty to protect their users. Much more can be done to tackle Islamophobia online and across society.

As we have heard, the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims has worked to create a definition of Islamophobia that has the confidence of more than 800 organisations, including political parties—the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, the SNP, the Green party and the Scottish Conservatives, as we have heard—as well as mayors and local government. We know that the definition—naming the problem—is often the first step needed to tackle the root causes. It seems bizarre that the Government cannot bring themselves to use the term Islamophobia, which begs the question: how do they intend to deal with a problem that they cannot even name? In recent weeks we have heard Azeem Rafiq's powerful testimony about his experience in cricket, which highlights how easy it can be for racism and Islamophobia to be dismissed as banter.

That points to the need to do much more to challenge such behaviour in our communities, in sport and in politics.

We know how important it is to celebrate what we have in common rather than focusing on what divides us, as we have witnessed in recent years. In closing, I want to mention my constituency, which once had the largest Jewish community in the UK. The Foundation for Jewish Heritage has been working to save a historic grade II-listed former synagogue in Merthyr Tydfil, which has lain empty since 2006 and become dilapidated. Its vision is to turn it into the Welsh Jewish heritage centre and a cultural venue. That work is progressing well and represents a huge opportunity to celebrate the history of the Jewish community in Merthyr Tydfil and across Wales.

I use that as just one example to show what can be done to celebrate diversity and I hope that this debate to mark the contribution of the Muslim community in Newport West and across Wales will go some way towards encouraging us further, as we realise that there is much more to be done to highlight and celebrate the contribution of the Muslim community in Newport, Cardiff, Swansea and right across Wales.

3.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): Diolch yn fawr, Ms McVey; thank you very much for calling me to speak. Prynhawn da, and as-salaam alaikum—I think that is probably about as much as I will get away with before the translators start to complain.

I begin by thanking you for your chairmanship, Ms McVey, and by thanking all Members who are here today for this positive debate. Of course, I particularly congratulate the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) on securing it, on talking about her own experiences and on giving thanks to the Muslim community of Newport and the rest of Wales. I absolutely side with her in that regard and strongly echo those thanks.

The hon. Lady mentioned Councillor Miqdad Al-Nuaimi. He, of course, used to be my councillor and I knew him quite well. In fact, my father knew him extremely well, because they both served on the council together for the same ward but for different political parties. I think she may know this already, but their first meeting in the late 1990s was what one might describe as being brisk and lively. However, they subsequently became very good friends through serving on the council and I know that Councillor Al-Nuaimi wrote a very kind letter to my mother last year after my father passed away. He is a man for whom I have great respect, even if I would not necessarily entirely agree with his political views.

I also echo the hon. Lady's words of thanks to, and support for, the Muslim community in Wales, because they really are a very important part of our culture. Islam is the second largest non-Christian faith in Wales, with approximately 46,000 adherents, according to the census data from 2011. As we have already heard, the first purpose-built mosque in Wales was constructed in Cardiff in 1947 and I believe that there are now over 40 mosques in Wales. I have only visited one, but I will perhaps receive invitations to visit more. I hope so, because at the mosque I visited I was treated with incredible

[David T. C. Davies]

hospitality by the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Cardiff. I was invited to a feast and I can honestly say that it was quite wonderful.

I am also proud of the magnificent work being done by my colleagues in the Senedd to combat Islamophobia. I must take some issue with some of the comments that have been made today. There is no place for Islamophobia anywhere, including in any political party, and I certainly would not want to see it being tolerated in the Conservative party. We can be judged to some extent by our deeds, because in the Senedd there are 16 Conservative Members out of 60—a proportion that is not high enough—and two of them are Muslim, including, of course, Natasha Asghar, who I have known for many years and who is one of my Assembly Members, as a regional Assembly Member.

It is very important that we do not just say the right words, which we can all do very easily, but demonstrate our commitment to tackling racism and Islamophobia by making sure that we reach out to all communities and offer all communities the same opportunities. Britain has a proud tradition of religious tolerance within the law and the Government are committed to creating a strong and integrated society in which hatred and prejudice are not tolerated, and within which all people are free to express their religious identity without fearing harassment or crime because of it.

Members have quite rightly raised the issue of the so-called far right. I never like to call those people that, because I am right-wing—centre-right—but I have nothing in common with them and nobody in the Conservative party has anything in common with the sort of fascists who we have sometimes seen harassing people because of their religion or ethnicity. I am sure that we all stand united in saying that such behaviour is totally and utterly unacceptable, and something that we would never ever support.

The covid-19 pandemic, which has been mentioned today, brought many challenges for all of society, including for those of faith, who were unable for months on end to adhere to their routine and tradition of frequenting their chosen place of worship. Again, we recognise the hardships faced by all religious communities, including the Muslim community, during lockdown. They were unable to celebrate Eid and Ramadan with family members and friends, or meet for Friday prayers.

We know these restrictions were put in place to keep everyone as safe as possible during the pandemic, and all the faith communities steadfastly observed the restrictions. The Government were very grateful for their support and co-operation. I am very pleased that, because of that outstanding work and the efforts of communities to observe the guidance and keep people safe, communal worship for all faiths was able to continue in some way during the recent restrictions.

We are also very grateful to the Muslim community for their support in encouraging vaccination take-up and in dispelling the myths surrounding the vaccine, some of which, as I think was said during the debate, were spread by people with very dubious political views.

I pay particular tribute to the founder of Muslim Doctors Cymru, Dr Bnar Talabani MBE, whom I had the pleasure of meeting online last week. Despite her

enormously busy day-to-day job working with the Wellcome Trust in Cardiff, she has been working tirelessly to dispel vaccine misinformation, particularly among younger age groups, through her viral TikTok videos. That is not a platform on which I am any sort of expert, but she has used it to reach out to people, particularly the younger generations. Dr Talabani's incredible online influence stretches well beyond our borders. As she has told me, she has been successfully reaching out to communities, particularly the Muslim community, not only in Wales but all over the world, including as far away as Australia; she has hosted question-and-answer sessions to encourage people to take up vaccination. I put on the record my thanks and congratulations to Dr Talabani on her well-deserved MBE and on her incredible work, which has, without any shadow of a doubt, saved lives.

I also pay tribute to Jamia mosque in Pillgwenlly, which last March opened its doors as a drop-in vaccine hub for local residents, irrespective of faith. As we come out of the pandemic, the UK Government will look at how we can further strengthen our relationship with Britain's Muslim community and with other faith groups.

I will mention a couple of the points raised during the debate. The hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) talked about the terrible attack that happened almost five years ago on the parliamentary estate. Coincidentally, I was on the square with my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), and we were 20 feet away from the attack as it happened. Either the following day or a week later, Westminster bridge was closed to commemorate the tragedy in an event organised by the Muslim community in London, who wanted to say how appalled they were, and how much they condemned that kind of ludicrous extremism, which does not represent the Muslim community in the UK. I was so proud to stand with Muslims on that bridge to thank the police for what they had done, and to show our support. There were people from the Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities—it was quite something, and it was very memorable.

The hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) made an important point about his constituent Luke Symons. It is a bit above my pay grade to start delving into foreign affairs, but the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that it is difficult to get people out of countries, and the UK Government follow very strict rules about that. However, he asked if he could have a meeting about that with the Foreign Secretary, and I am sure that my officials will have taken note of that reasonable request. We will do what we can to help.

The UK Government are committed to protecting freedom of religion and belief. Freedom of religion and the ability of all people to worship where and how they wish—or not to worship at all—is part of what makes Britain the vibrant and resilient country it is today.

A number of Members have asked about the definition of Islamophobia. I think the law needs to be used to crack down on anyone who is abusing people. I have read through the definition of Islamophobia in question, and the problem is that although no one would disagree with parts of it, I fear that if it were fully implemented, other parts of it could be used to stop people having historical debates, or other kinds of debates. A point in the definition states that nobody should be able to say that Islam was spread at the point of a sword. Clearly, it was not, but some historians would say that it could be

argued that Christianity was spread at the point of a sword during the crusades. I am not saying that it was, or that it was not—I am not a historian—but historians might want to make that argument in a reasonable way.

There is also a point about denying the right of self-determination to Palestine and Kashmir. Personally, I hope that we see a Palestinian state at some point; I know less about Kashmir. The point is that there is a debate to be had about those matters. What amounts to a law on Islamophobia should be there to protect Muslims from any kind of abuse or stereotyping, not to stop people having a debate about the rights and wrongs of foreign policy in Palestine and elsewhere. That might be part of the problem.

Afzal Khan: If we look at the definition, the first point to note is that it is from an all-party parliamentary group that had people from across the parties, with legal backgrounds and expertise, looking at all these issues. My second point is that almost 1,000 organisations in the Muslim community accept this definition, and all the political parties, including the Scottish Conservatives, have accepted it. That is where it gets difficult. Why is there this one part of a party that does not accept it?

David T. C. Davies: With all due respect, an APPG cannot make the law; it can only make recommendations. As I say, I have looked through the definition and most of it seems perfectly reasonable, but I can see problems with some of it. We have to be very careful that we have laws that protect people from being discriminated against or abused because of their religion or ethnicity, but allow people the freedom to question beliefs. There are people in the Muslim community who would question the beliefs of other people in the Muslim community, and they should have the right to do that, in the same way that I, as a Christian, might well want to—and, in fact, do—question the beliefs of some people who also claim to be Christian. We have to be able to have an open debate about people's belief systems, so that is probably the problem with that definition.

None the less, it is important that we use laws, such as those on public order offences, to ensure that people can worship freely and are not discriminated against or abused because of their religion or ethnicity. If we are not quite there at the moment—and I accept that there are problems—we need to change the law to make sure that happens.

Afzal Khan: Even if we accept what the Minister is saying, the difficulty is that we cannot deny that the biggest group that is facing hate is the Muslim group. That is according to Home Office figures. If the Government are aware of that fact and do not accept this definition, which the Minister thinks might have flaws, how many years do they need in order to come up with an answer to this? That is the problem. The Government have been saying that they will come up with an answer, but they have not done anything.

David T. C. Davies: We already have laws in place to protect people from discrimination or abuse, but people are breaking the law. That does not necessarily mean that the law is wrong or needs to be changed. Perhaps it needs to be enforced more, or perhaps the penalties need to be looked at. We need to be careful about any legislation that will have an impact on freedom of speech. I do not think that we can get to a point of equality and tolerance

simply by saying to people that they are not allowed to express a view about something, be it be Palestine, Kashmir, the history of the crusades or whatever. Those are all things that people should be able to discuss.

Geraint Davies: Will the Minister give way?

David T. C. Davies: I do feel that I am getting slightly away from my responsibilities as a junior Minister in the Wales Office—I will probably get the sack tomorrow—but go on; I will take one more intervention.

Geraint Davies: I am sure that the Minister will accept that there are limits to freedom of speech. I am thinking in particular of the online incitement to racial hatred by groups that inspire hatred and division, such as Voice of Wales, which has been taken off YouTube and then came back on to it. Do we not need a balance between what is called freedom of speech and something that is damaging and corrupting to our society?

David T. C. Davies: I agree with the hon. Member: there are, and have to be, limits on freedom of speech in a civilised society. We cannot have people abusing it in order to incite violence or hatred against other groups, so in that sense, I agree.

I would like to bring this debate back to Wales and the Muslim community. I recognise that the Muslim community in Wales and elsewhere has faced intolerance and discrimination. In fact, that point was raised with me by the Ahmadiyya Muslims whom I met in Cardiff. They said to me that on occasion, when they have tried to get a taxi to their mosque, they were told by the driver that they would not be taken. The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) will probably know what I am getting at here. All of us, especially those of us in Government, must say that we will never tolerate anti-Muslim hatred in any form, and will seek to stamp it out wherever it occurs.

We have supported Tell MAMA with just over £4 million between 2016 and 2022 to monitor and combat anti-Muslim hatred. We have a proud tradition of religious tolerance in the law, and we have committed to creating a strong and integrated society in which prejudice is not tolerated. People must always be free to express their religious identity and to live without fear of harassment and crime because of it. We launched the places of worship scheme, which is designed to reduce the risk and impact of hate crime at places of worship and associated faith community centres, and we have provided funding for protective security measures, such as CCTV, fencing and intruder alarms, to places of worship and associated faith community centres that are vulnerable to hate crime. Some 241 grants worth £5 million have been awarded to places of worship across England and Wales, 84 of which were awarded to mosques.

We in the Wales Office have supported the work of the UK Government in bringing people from Afghanistan to the United Kingdom, including to Wales. The hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), who has had to leave, would be able to describe being in touch with us in the Wales Office, and how our officials did everything they could to help in a small number of cases. Thousands of Afghans have supported NATO forces in Afghanistan in recent years, and we acknowledge the dangers posed to them and others as a result of the transition of power

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in that country. I am proud of the role that the UK Government have taken in supporting Afghan citizens, and the admittedly much smaller role that the Wales Office has played in supporting a few of those families. We will exceed our initial aim to resettle 5,000 people through the Afghan citizen resettlement scheme in the first year. In the four months since Operation Warm Welcome was launched, we have worked across 10 Government Departments, with devolved Administrations and with around 350 councils and local agencies, as well as with charities and volunteers.

I had slightly more time than I thought, but I have said most of what I want to say. In conclusion, this has been an example of the kind of positive debate we do not see enough of in the House of Commons. Broadly speaking, we are all basically in agreement. The hon. Member for Newport West began by talking about the enormous contribution that the Muslim community has made in Wales. She extolled the virtues of Newport. I absolutely agree with what she said.

All Members have spoken about the importance of making sure that Muslims in this country and in Wales do not face discrimination or hatred as a result of following their religion. I agree 100%, and am more than happy to work with any hon. Members in the House to that end. I make many visits to Wales. If any Members of Parliament from Wales wish to ensure that an invitation to another mosque comes to me—especially if food is involved—I am sure we will look very favourably on it.

3.43 pm

Ruth Jones: I thank everybody who has participated this afternoon. I agree with the Minister that it has been a good-tempered debate—much better than the last one we had, in November. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Newport East (Jessica Morden), for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), and for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan). I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for their helpful interventions, and I thank the Front Benchers as well.

We have celebrated, commemorated and honoured our Muslim communities. We in Wales are very proud of our strong and long links with our Muslim brothers and sisters. I listened very carefully to the Minister's account of why the definition of Islamophobia has not been signed by the Conservative party—I am still not convinced. I did ask some specific questions, but I will follow up in writing so that those queries are not lost. I thank you, Ms McVey, for your fair and thoughtful chairing this afternoon. I pay tribute to the Muslim community across Wales. We are stronger together and diversity enriches us all.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Muslim community in Wales.

3.44 pm

Sitting suspended.

Organ Donation and Transplantation Strategy

4 pm

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I will call Anthony Mangnall to move the motion. I will then call the Minister to respond. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the organ donation and transplantation strategy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the opportunity to debate the important topic of the organ donation and transplantation strategy. I also thank the Minister and her departmental team for their responses to my inquiries about organ donation on behalf of my constituents. Their answers have been detailed, helpful and reassuring.

In the time I have been in this place, I have learned that Westminster Hall debates are not always used to be helpful to the Government and are often used to point out their flaws and failings. I may be guilty of having done that once or twice myself, but I want to use this debate to do three things. First, I want to congratulate the Government on the steps they have taken thus far, most notably with the Organ Donation (Deemed Consent) Act 2019. Secondly, I want to encourage further education and awareness around organ donation. Thirdly, I want to explore future steps that the Government can take in relation to organ donation and transplantation strategy.

In May 2020, the law around organ donation in England was changed to allow more people to save more lives. The Organ Donation (Deemed Consent) Act, which many hon. Members present supported, changed the law to mean that an individual agrees to become an organ donor when they die if they are over 18, have not opted out and are not in an excluded group. The Government's legislation brought us more into line with other countries but, more importantly, the number of available organ donors increased dramatically, while the number of people opting out of the opting-in initiative only slightly increased. Pre opt-out—before 5 May 2020—the UK had 26,037,200 registrations, whereas the total UK opt-in registration was 27,594,279 on 13 February 2020. By comparison, fewer than 1.5 million people opted out before 5 May 2020, with the total number now standing at 2.3 million. These numbers show that in less than two years, we have had a sizeable increase in the number of potential organ donors, while only a small percentage of the population have chosen to opt out of the initiative.

NHS Blood and Transplant launched a public awareness campaign in April 2019 to inform the public about the prospective law change and the choices available to them. An evaluation of that campaign found that over 75% of adults in England were aware of the new system of consent. The third year of the campaign, which I believe comes to an end in March 2022, looks to encourage people to talk to their families and loved ones about organ donation and their organ donation decisions. With consent rates currently at 68% across the UK and 78.8% in the south-west, it is particularly welcome to

see the Government state their ambition to increase consent levels to 80%. A 12% increase is likely to result in approximately 700 more transplants per year and countless lives saved.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. The hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), who is present, the former MP Geoffrey Robinson and I were part of the team that worked to get the organ transplant legislation changed. As a member of the Democratic Unionist party, I was always in favour of the opt-out. I am very pleased to say that my party saw the light and supported that line of thought. With Northern Ireland and other countries in the UK having passed legislation to adopt the choice to opt out of organ donations, does the hon. Gentleman agree that now is the time for a UK-wide strategy to ensure that no organ is lost because the system does not efficiently make the most of the connectivity between each region of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Anthony Mangnall: I am always delighted to take questions from the hon. Gentleman. I absolutely agree that if there is parity in all four corners of the United Kingdom, there is an opportunity to ensure that all citizens can get the organs they need; that they can get on to the register where possible; and that there is a developed and comprehensive transplantation strategy across the country. I understand that the hon. Gentleman went further than his party and was by far one of the earliest supporters of the opt-out initiative. I know to my heart that he was a pioneer in leading his party and getting them to where they needed to be to see the changes in Northern Ireland. I am grateful for his question.

As I was saying, the Government and the NHS should be proud of the campaign that they have run to date, and the undeniable progress that it has delivered. That brings me to my second point: the organ donor register. I am sure that all colleagues here today will agree that it is essential that we encourage as many people as possible to sign up to the organ donor register. As of 31 March 2021, 38% of the population had joined the register, while 3% had opted out. Initiatives are already in place to increase registration, with a number of routes available, whether through the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, the NHS app, applying for a Boots advantage card, or even through the NHS Blood and Transplant organ donation website, which, just for clarity, is at www.organdonation.nhs.uk.

It is vital that we continue to keep as many avenues open as possible, and that the campaign continues to be fully supported and championed by the Government. With that in mind, I ask the Minister what plans are in place to continue to raise awareness of the organ donor register and to encourage continued conversation and education around organ donation. Secondly, would the Minister consider extending the scheme to include other official forms? That might include, but not be limited to, those signing up to the electoral roll or giving blood.

The organ donor register moves an individual's organ donation from a passive decision to an active one. For every individual that decides to sign up to the organ donation website, they are providing a record of their consent to help save lives should the unimaginable happen to them. Importantly, by signing that register,

individuals are providing an affirmation of their desire to be an organ donor, which I hope that their family members and loved ones will honour—I will touch on that again shortly.

As of 13 February 2022, there are 6,157 people waiting for an organ transplant in the UK. Even the large numbers that I have buried the House in thus far hide the fact that there is a shortage of donors in the UK. Between April 2020 and March 2021, in the UK, there were a total of 1,180 deceased donors and 444 living donors, which resulted in 3,391 lives being either saved or dramatically improved by an organ transplant. However, 474 people died while on the active waiting list and a further 693 were removed, primarily because of deteriorating health. Of course, I accept the varied reasons why people come off the list, but the numbers provide an indication that while the situation is improving, there is still work to be done.

The NHS Blood and Transplant strategy, “Organ Donation and Transplantation 2030: Meeting the Need”, published on 1 June, calls for a highly public campaign broadening the settings in which people might find information around organ donation. It also includes six key points: making living and deceased donation an expected part of care; developing and pioneering new technologies and techniques; ensuring recipient outcomes are the best in the world; ensuring that people of all backgrounds and circumstances have timely access to the organs they need; maintaining a sustainable service across the UK; and building a pioneering culture of research and innovation in donation and transplantation in the UK. I ask the Minister how those six action points are being monitored, and how often they will be reviewed. Furthermore, does she feel that anything should be added to those points since the introduction of the 2019 Act?

Although I promised to be positive and congratulatory about the Government's action on this matter, I am aware of a few areas relating to organ donation that are causing some concern. As mentioned already, under the 2019 Act, and specifically the opt-out system, all over-18s—albeit with a few caveats—are considered to become organ donors when they die unless they opt out. An individual can also actively register, as I have mentioned already, through the organ donor register. However, a family member or loved one can—and often does—override the donation of an organ in both instances. As mentioned already, the consent rate for eligible donors was 68% between April 2020 and March 2021, meaning that loved ones, for various reasons, refused to support 32% of potential donations. That equates to 695 donors.

There are myriad reasons why consent for deceased donors might not be given: the patient expressing a desire not to donate, but not opting out; a lack of desire for further surgery on a body; a feeling that the patient had suffered enough; the fact that the process takes too long; or the fact that the donation was against religious beliefs. Of course we must respect the decisions and views of family members and loved ones; staggeringly, however, 10.2% of those 32% of organ donations were refused because family members were unsure about whether the patient would have wanted to donate. Surely that clearly shows the continuing need to have a conversation and actively encourage greater sign-up to the organ donation register. In actual numbers, that 10.2% equates

[Anthony Mangnall]

to 71 individuals whose organs might have helped to save a great number of lives. Of course, I make no judgment about those families and the decisions that they take in incredibly difficult circumstances, but there is an opportunity for us to go that little bit further and help save those extra few lives.

With that in mind, what progress has been made with the Leave Them Certain campaign mentioned in the NHS Blood and Transplant strategic plan, which I referenced earlier? I understand that the Human Tissue Authority guidance specifically states that families will always be consulted and that scrutiny is needed in the process. However, where possible we should be trying to eliminate the second-guessing and possibility of going against the deceased's final wishes.

I asked for this debate because among the regular correspondence that I have had with constituents on the matter of organ donation, I have had the incredible good fortune of having been introduced to Sarah Meredith and her family. Sarah is a 29-year-old constituent who lives with cystic fibrosis. Thanks to the approval of the drug Kaftrio, Sarah and thousands of others living with cystic fibrosis can look ahead with an improved degree of certainty and a greater quality of life. However, that wonder drug does not solve all the difficulties of living with that disease; Sarah needs a liver transplant.

Over the course of the last two years, I have met Sarah's mother Cathy and sister Jessica to hear first hand about the ailments from which Sarah suffers and some of the problems that they have identified within our transplant system and the wider regional disparity when it comes to healthcare services. I have already highlighted some of the concerns around organ donation, but I would like to add a few words about healthcare infrastructure. The organ utilisation group, chaired by Professor Stephen Powis, was established by the then Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), to provide recommendations that would deliver improvements in the number of organs accepted and successfully transplanted; to optimise the use of existing skilled workforce investment in infrastructure; to support innovation in the field of organ transplantation; to standardise practices across the country—a point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon); and to provide equity of access and patient outcomes. I look forward to seeing the recommendations, the report when it is published—in March, I believe—and the Government's response.

Will the Minister come before the House when the report is published to take questions from Members interested in this topic? Although the south-west can boast a high consent rate—it is only slightly off the Government's 80% target—we are at something of a disadvantage when it comes to liver transplant units across the region. There are just eight such units in the UK, including one in a children's hospital. The liver transplant centres nearest my constituency of Totnes in south Devon are in either London or Birmingham.

I have heard anecdotal and first-hand accounts about ill patients who have been asked to make the journey to London from south Devon for a transplant, only to arrive and discover that the organ they were expecting has deteriorated and is no longer suitable for transplantation. One can only imagine how awful that

journey is in both directions in that situation. I understand that there is a new national programme to expand the number of living transplant centres across the UK and that the north-west and south-west are two priority areas due to a lack of existing transplant infrastructure. Will the Minister reassure me and all those across the south-west who are hoping for an improved service that this new programme will be rolled out at pace? It is clear that many cannot wait.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I hesitate to intervene on the hon. Gentleman because he is making an excellent speech, but I wanted to take the opportunity to warmly congratulate him on securing this debate and bringing this important matter to the House's attention. I should declare an interest as part of the team of people who took the legislation through the House—that was a genuinely outstanding cross-party effort and I am really delighted that we are proceeding now in that same vein.

The hon. Gentleman rightly raised concerns about the number of people currently on the waiting list; we are now at a five-year high and the pandemic and lockdowns have not been helpful. Does he agree that although legislation was, of course, very important, it is not enough in itself? What we need is continued public education and additional capacity within the NHS so that we can continue the important process of saving lives. I congratulate him again on securing this important debate.

Anthony Mangnall: I thank the hon. and gallant—and mayoral—Member for his intervention. He has been an extraordinary champion on this matter; a significant amount of my research has been on the back of his words in this place to help to get that legislation to where it needs to be. On his point about education, I think he is absolutely correct. We need a combination of education and funding across all our hospitals, GP surgeries and other available forums to promote this issue so that we can bring down that five-year high and help to get as many people as possible off the transplant list, as quickly as possible.

Jim Shannon: I want to say for the record that my nephew—my brother's son—had a kidney transplant; he was born as a wee child with a kidney the size of my thumbnail. He had to wait until he was almost 16 before he got a transplant, but he got it, and today that young man has a full life because of that. If anyone ever needs evidence—I know we all have some—of what a transplant can do, I can speak personally to that.

Anthony Mangnall: As ever, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his powerful intervention. He uses personal experience to lend great weight to a very serious topic, and that has certainly been registered by me and by the House. As we develop more and more strategies, as I hope we will, to encourage more and more to sign up on the organ donor register, people will hear his words, among those of others.

We are often quick to say that other countries have it better than us. While I am not suggesting that that is the case—especially thanks to the remarkable improvements that have been made over a short period of time—I will ask the Minister a final two questions. First, what engagement and consideration has the Department of Health and Social Care given to other countries' organ donation and transplant strategies? Spain is often

mentioned, and I would be interested to hear whether there is any consideration of that model and whether we can learn anything from it.

Secondly, the transplant benefit score also determines the position in which a patient might sit in relation to receiving an organ. How is that position altered when a new drug is used on a patient, presumably—one hopes—improving their situation? It would be interesting to understand whether the transplant benefit score is quick enough to determine where they are on that list.

The Meredith family are a fantastic group of campaigners for organ donation, and they are the reason why this debate is happening. I hope that their efforts in pushing me and others will result in renewed campaigns to make people aware of the organ donation register and to improve access to transplant facilities in the south-west. I very much look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

4.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) for securing this debate and for being such a passionate champion for organ donation and transplantation. Having helped the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) with the legislation, my hon. Friend is not just sitting on his laurels, but continuing with the campaign, because, as has been said, the legislation on its own is not enough to make a difference.

I also thank all those donors and their families who, at a very difficult time in their lives, have to make incredibly tough decisions. Even with the changes in legislation, it is an incredibly difficult time for them. Hon. Members will know that the 6,000 patients across the UK who are today waiting for lifesaving transplants are incredibly grateful for those who donate. The estimate is that every donor can save around nine lives, so it really does make a difference. More than one person a day sadly dies on the waiting list, so it is crucial that organ donation continues to be a high-profile issue.

It is nearly two years since the introduction of deemed consent for organ and tissue donation, known as Max and Keira's law. All donors are now considered potential organ and tissue donors after death unless they make a decision that they do not want to donate. As my hon. Friend has said, among all the families approached since May 2020, the consent rate is about 66%. It could be higher. It is a good figure—much better than where we were—but there is still a lot of room for improvement. However, it has led to 296 organ donors and resulted in 714 organs being transplanted: we cannot overestimate the difference that has made to the individuals who received those organs and to their families.

If people wish to opt out, they can do so: currently, 27 million people have opted into the UK organ donor register and 2 million have opted out, so there is flexibility there. However, for many people, there is still a lack of awareness that a register exists, and very often they have not had those conversations with family members. Should the time come when, unfortunately, an incident happens and organ donation needs to be considered, families play a crucial role throughout the donation process, both helping NHS staff understand the wishes of the

deceased and ensuring their organs are suitable for transplantation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes has pointed out, it is really important that we continue to have national conversations about organ donation, so that if the time comes, the family of the deceased person are aware of what the issues are. Even with an opt-in and opt-out system, that conversation should take place well in advance.

At difficult moments, both families and NHS staff who may be working in A&E or in different clinical units may not feel comfortable having that conversation. When the family are struggling to come to terms with the fact that their loved one is on the register, but they are not happy about that, those are very delicate conversations to have, and it is important that staff are supported as well. The views of the family will always be taken into account: even though they cannot revoke legally valid consent, they will have an influence; as we heard from my hon. Friend, that is having an impact and meaning that some donations are not happening.

The role of the specialist nurse in discussing the matter sensitively and helping to understand some of the family's concerns is important and that role needs to be facilitated wherever possible, because that can make the crucial difference between the family accepting the decision of their loved one and not coming to terms with it. We need to make that conversation routine and build awareness, because a 32% impact on the loss of organs into the system for donation is a very high figure.

NHS Blood and Transplant, which is responsible for organ and tissue donation across the UK, has launched the new UK-wide organ donation strategy, the main aim of which is simply to increase organ donation and transplantation. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes asked what work is being done to raise awareness: we have organ donation week in September, and last September that led to the Leave Them Certain campaign. That campaign aimed to reinforce the role of the family and normalise people sharing their organ donation decision with family members so that, if that discussion needs to happen, it does not come as a shock. We are also introducing organ donation and transplantation into the school curriculum, because it is important to start that conversation early on, and aiming to promote awareness in young people about not just their own decision, but that of their other family members.

There was a multimedia campaign on Valentine's day this year—my hon. Friend might have been busy on Valentine's day; I do not know—to encourage families to have a heart-to-heart discussion about organ donation. There were 300 people waiting for a heart transplant on Valentine's day, including more than 40 children, so it was thought crucial to raise awareness on that day, but we can all do our bit when it comes to promoting the need for organ donation. World Kidney Day is 11 March, which will provide us with another opportunity, but I am very happy if my hon. Friend wants to apply for another debate this coming September to hold our feet to the fire in making sure that we are driving up organ donation numbers.

I want to touch on health disparities, because some communities are struggling more than most when it comes to organ donation. Black and Asian communities face significant shortages and significantly longer waits—around 10 months longer than the general population—and much of that disparity is due to the lack of donation in

[Maria Caulfield]

those communities. There is a whole host of reasons why that is and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes has said, this is not about judging those who do not donate: it is about increasing awareness of the difference that organ donation can make to people's lives. Alongside other stakeholders, such as the National Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Transplant Alliance and all the main faith organisations in England, we are actively trying to tackle some of the concerns of particular groups and communities around organ donation. We are raising awareness and promoting the work that can be done.

I am particularly concerned about the point that my hon. Friend mentioned about provision for living donations in the south-west, and the logistics that sometimes lead to donations and transplantations failing. If someone is willing to donate an organ, we should make every effort to ensure that it becomes a successful transplant. I will take away his point and look at some of the factors that might be influencing that situation.

Covid has had an impact on the service. As we heard from the hon. Member for Barnsley Central, the waiting list is higher than it has been in past, but I am pleased to say that organ donation and transplantation has now mostly returned to pre-pandemic levels, although there is a backlog of people to get through.

Jim Shannon: In my intervention, I referred to the need for co-ordination between the four regions, so that no organ could or would be lost. There was some discussion in the newspapers, although I am not sure of the evidential basis for it, that said that some organs had been lost during the covid pandemic. Let us make sure that does not happen.

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We need to ensure that we tackle any practical or logistical issues; I am happy to look at that. If there are particular regions where the centres are difficult to access because of the distances involved, then we absolutely need to consider that.

I take on board the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes about improving the ability of people to sign up for the register, whether through the electoral roll or through other mechanisms; we want to make that as easy as possible. I am convinced that there are groups of people who would be very happy to donate, but we need to make it as easy as possible for them to do so.

I will look at international comparisons. If there are lessons to be learned from other countries, let us not reinvent the wheel but gain some knowledge from them.

I thank all hon. Members for taking part today, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes, and I thank the Meredith family, who are driving this campaign forward and are the reason for the debate today. We are making huge progress. The legislation has made a big difference, but there is lots more we can do to ensure that people are not waiting on the transplant list any longer than they need to.

Question put and agreed to.

Child Sexual Exploitation by Organised Networks

4.30 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse report on child sexual exploitation by organised networks.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey, and I know that you take a keen interest in the topic.

"Children are sexually exploited by networks in all parts of England and Wales in the most degrading and destructive ways. Each of these acts is a crime. This investigation has revealed extensive failures by local authorities and police forces to keep pace with the pernicious and changing problem of the sexual exploitation of children by networks."

Those are not my words, but the conclusion of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. The inquiry published its report on child sexual exploitation by organised networks, also known as grooming gangs, on 1 February this year. It followed two years of hearing and evidence gathering, of which I was proud to be a core participant. The report paints a grim picture and describes a culture that forces survivors of child sexual exploitation to fight to be believed. Those who were heard were made to feel as though they had brought the exploitation on themselves.

If the abuse was prosecuted, the victims had to relive their trauma in court, where they were brutalised by an adversarial process that lacked the empathy to support them. I thank the brave survivors and victims who shared their experience with us during the public hearings; I cannot imagine how difficult it must have been. Their experiences were so similar to those of the survivors that I know in Rotherham. It was incredibly powerful to hear about the clear and organised pattern of abuse nationally, but also so frustrating to hear that the same failings by authorities to protect and prosecute occurred all over the country.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and on all the work she has done on the issue over many years. I wonder if she is as concerned as I am about the online abuse that our children are exposed to? Even today, we are hearing about children having explicit images forwarded to them, and we also hear how social media is used to co-ordinate those gangs. Does she think that the draft Online Safety Bill will deliver and protect our children online?

Sarah Champion: My hon. Friend raises a very pertinent point, and I commend her for the work that she has done to try and prevent this hideous crime. She is right that the initial stages of grooming are now almost exclusively happening online. Today I was with the Minister for School Standards talking about that, because the Department for Education's teaching around grooming still features someone going up to a child in a park with a bottle of alcohol and does not tackle social media. My hon. Friend is right to raise that and the online harms Bill must reflect it.

The inquiry took thousands of hours, costing millions of pounds and effectively reached the same recommendations that I and others have been raising in Parliament for years—and that relate to what survivors have been saying for decades. However, in that time,

little has actually changed. CSE is still flourishing, and abusers still seem to flout the law with impunity. The Government must now take decisive action to empower local authorities and law enforcement to protect children from exploitation.

The report makes six key recommendations that provide clear actions for Government to take. I urge the Minister to act urgently to implement them in full to prevent further horrific abuse. First, the criminal justice system's response to CSE by organised gangs must be strengthened. The law must recognise the particular nature of sexual offences where a child is exploited by two or more people. The Government must swiftly amend the Sentencing Act 2020 to provide a mandatory aggravating factor in the sentencing of such cases. Secondly, the Minister should publish an enhanced version of the child exploitation disruption toolkit as soon as possible. The Government recognised the need to do that in their tackling child sexual exploitation and abuse strategy over a year ago, but the updated toolkit is yet to be published.

The toolkit needs to make clear that the core element of the definition of child sexual exploitation is that a child was controlled, coerced, manipulated or deceived into sexual activity. Currently, English statutory guidance defines child sexual exploitation as requiring some sort of "exchange" between the perpetrator and the victim. Barnardo's and the IICSA report agree that exploitation does not necessarily involve exchange, financial advantage or an increase in status, not least because it implies collaboration by that child. The toolkit must reflect the fact that, both to recognise the true nature of the crime and to shift from victim-blaming, the definition must be updated.

The Government must also give agencies clear guidance on building effective problem profiles for CSE that are separate from other forms of exploitation. Problem profiling draws information about child sexual exploitation from different agencies together in one place. That process should enable agencies to understand fully the nature and the extent of CSE, and to commission services, train staff and prioritise action.

Clearer guidance on the types of data that agencies should use, and on how frequently profiles should be updated, will lead to a more accurate picture of the full scale and nature of CSE. That would enable more effective action to be taken to prevent harm and to stop organisations from protecting their data rather than protecting the child.

The third recommendation is that the Department for Education should update its guidance on CSE. It needs to reflect accurately what constitutes exploitation, the significant online threats faced by children today and the prevalence of networks of offenders.

Fourthly, all updated national guidance must make it clear that signs that a child is being sexually exploited must never be treated as an indication that a child is only at risk of experiencing that harm. Local authorities must ensure that assessments of risk and harm clearly differentiate between potential harm and actual harm. Too often, victims are already being sexually exploited, but they are incorrectly categorised as merely being at risk so little action is taken to protect them.

Fifthly, police force and local authorities must collect data on all cases of known or suspected child sexual exploitation. Accurate data about CSE cases, including

the sex, ethnicity and disability of both the victims and the perpetrators, will help to identify patterns of CSE offending, particularly where those offences are committed by organised networks. That data also helps police forces to take more offensive action to disrupt and investigate offenders.

Finally, the Department for Education must ban the placement in unregulated care homes of all children who have experienced or who are at heightened risk of experiencing sexual exploitation. The evidence before the inquiry identified grave concerns about the capacity of unregulated care homes to safeguard properly children placed in their care. Sixteen and 17-year-olds should never be left in B&Bs where perpetrators have 24-hour access to them. All children are inherently vulnerable and must be protected from abusers who seek to take advantage.

Although I am pleased that many of my recommendations were included in the final report, it is disappointing to see that some of the key ones were not included.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I declare my interest as recorded in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I congratulate the hon. Lady on all the work that she has done over so many years and I am sure that she shares with me a sense of déjà vu that a problem that we were talking about five years ago or 10 years ago persists. I remember launching the child sexual exploitation action plan back in 2011 and many of the things in that plan are things that she repeats now. Why does she think that despite the hugely enhanced awareness of CSE, which went on in the shadows before, and better training for and awareness among the police and other professionals, it is still going on, and that people still think they can get away with it and do get away with it?

Sarah Champion: I am blessed to be in a Chamber with people who have campaigned for decades on the issue and made changes; the hon. Gentleman is certainly one of them. To be quite blunt, I think the reason it still goes on is that it is too expensive to deal with, and too endemic, and people have just washed their hands of it. I cannot express how much it upsets me to say that, but it is the only conclusion that I can draw, namely that it is too expensive to look after these children properly.

I made recommendations that the inquiry did not take up. One was that local authorities must take urgent steps to improve the access to CSE support systems for children from ethnic minority communities. That requires the Government to mandate that institutions dealing with CSE incorporate an understanding of the range of cultural or ethnic backgrounds into the services they offer. It is deeply disappointing that the IICSA report made no recommendations on the specific issue of CSE among ethnic minority communities, despite that and the lack of cultural-specific services being a major and systemic problem.

Next, the Government cannot accept that the court proceedings must, by their nature, further brutalise victims of abuse, by forcing them to relive their trauma in repeated interactions with the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and again in court. Of course, justice must be served, but how is justice served if victims and survivors are too afraid of the legal system to come forward or

[Sarah Champion]

give evidence? I hope that the upcoming victims Bill will provide the desperately needed changes in those areas. I strongly encourage Ministers to continue to engage with me, MPs and organisations that work in the sector, to finally get this right.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for all the work she has done over many years. Does she agree that the pressures on the court system mean that the situation will be even more challenging? It will mean even more problems for victims and those who are trying to support them. Will the Minister address the point about what she is doing with the relevant Ministries to ensure that the legal system is not failing victims of child sexual abuse, after the horrific experiences they have faced?

Sarah Champion: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Rape figures were recently issued by the CPS and prosecutions are even lower than they were. In a number of cases that have not gone forward to prosecution, the victims have been blamed for disengaging with the process when the process is adversarial and they do not get the support they need to protect them from people who are largely still out in their communities. It shocks me; the whole system is wrong, and I fully support my hon. Friend's campaign to address it.

Abusers commit horrific crimes, but we will not secure convictions unless victims and survivors are thoroughly supported throughout the criminal process. I know that the Minister is committed to tackling child abuse. I hope she agrees today that the Government will accept and implement the findings of the IICSA report. But, to be blunt, warm words mean nothing when children are still being harmed.

To highlight that, I have two local examples where I need the Minister's help. For the past four years, Barnardo's in Rotherham has been working, through the trusted relationships project, to support children who are vulnerable to sexual and criminal exploitation. It provides direct, one-to-one support for children and wider support for their families, and carries out awareness-raising sessions for groups of pupils in schools, as well as providing training and resources across Rotherham. However, its funding from the Home Office is due to end on 31 March. The loss of contract will mean that the four team members will have to close 35 children's cases, and will not be able to go into schools and community groups to deliver work or do assemblies on CSE, child criminal exploitation and healthy relationships.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate and for all the work she has done over the years. I praise Barnardo's, which has been doing a fabulous job. That funding cut would be morally reprehensible of the Government, and would leave even more children vulnerable. It would be brilliant if the Minister could reassure our hon. Friend that that funding will remain.

Sarah Champion: I thank my hon. Friend, who I know does a lot of work in her community. Barnardo's, 25 years before anyone really acknowledged child sexual exploitation was a thing, was trying to prevent it. It is deeply naive to believe it is not a current crime in Rotherham, when there are more than 300 identified

abusers on whom the National Crime Agency has enough evidence to take them to court, but there is no court capacity. We need help, Minister, not funding cuts at this point.

The next thing that I want to raise is the case of—and I use this word loosely—Lord Ahmed, who recently received a custodial sentence of five years and six months for two counts of attempted rape of a young girl and one for the serious sexual assault of a boy in Rotherham in the 1970s. This man is not a hereditary peer. He was given the honour in 1998 by the then Labour Government, but we threw him out of the party almost a decade ago. In 2020, the Lords Conduct Committee found that he had breached the code of conduct by sexually assaulting a vulnerable woman and exploiting her both emotionally and sexually. The Committee recommended that he be expelled from the House, but instead—

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Order. Just in case this is sub judice at the moment—

Sarah Champion: It is not. He is in jail, and this is all in the public domain.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I was just checking.

Sarah Champion: The Lords Committee recommended that he be expelled from the House, but he stepped down to avoid the humiliation. The Government now need to do their duty and introduce legislation to remove his title. It is an insult to his victims, to all survivors and to justice that that does not happen automatically, so I urge the Minister to correct the situation as soon as is practicably possible.

Child sexual exploitation is not inevitable. It must be stopped, and we all must do everything in our power to make that happen.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Many Members want to speak, and I am looking at time limits. We will get to the Front-Bench speakers at about 5.10 pm, so we will start with a three-minute limit. If need be, I will reduce it to two minutes.

4.46 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Ms McVey, and I do not intend to detain the House for long.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on all the work she has done over many years to highlight the problem, and on being like a terrier and never letting it go. Her tenacity and determination on child sexual exploitation is completely unparalleled, and I am proud to stand alongside her in raising the issue in the House. I have seen her determination both in relation to the awful cases of child abuse that took place in Rotherham and internationally through our work together on the International Development Committee, which she chairs. She has rightly held the Government's feet to the fire, and I am sure the Minister will join me in acknowledging that that sort of parliamentary pressure is exactly what is needed to

ensure that our national institutions, such as the police and local authorities, perform their functions correctly. I thank the hon. Member for securing the debate and would like to reiterate a few points, as we have very little time.

I welcome the report of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, which was published at the beginning of the month. It focuses on the sexual exploitation of children by those networks and is a powerful and important report. Although it focuses on six case study areas, it acknowledges that child sexual exploitation by networks or organised groups takes place all over the country. It is not an issue specific to one area; rather, it is widespread. We must be as much on the lookout for such conduct in Derby as anywhere mentioned in the report. We know that because, before the Rotherham case was discovered, we had Operation Retriever in Derby, which was a very similar situation to all the others throughout the country.

Keeping children safe is one of the most important duties of lawmakers, and it is precisely for that reason that I introduced the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Bill, which will protect children from marriage. I do not want to confuse child marriage with child sexual exploitation, because they are not really connected, but the fact that my Bill is needed shows there is a long way to go on child safeguarding in this country. I have worked closely with both the safeguarding Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), and the victims Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), during the progress of the Bill. I know that they are deeply committed to the protection of children, particularly vulnerable children, so I know that they will be as concerned as I am about the report's findings.

4.50 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing this powerful debate.

The findings of the report are damning and must act as a catalyst for change in our safeguarding procedures. The report finds that children are being exploited by networks in all parts of England and Wales. It also highlights extensive failures of local authorities, police forces and other public bodies as they struggle to keep pace with the changing nature of sexual exploitation of children.

When I read through the report, it struck a chord with me because of the striking similarities with the problems that I encountered in my work on child criminal exploitation. I will use my speech to highlight the need to ensure that the solutions to the problems raised in the inquiry recognise the full spectrum of abuse that vulnerable young people are sadly still at risk of suffering.

This topic is close to my heart and, sadly, features too much in my work as an MP representing an inner-London constituency. Child criminal exploitation is sadly not a new phenomenon. For many years, gangs have exploited, coerced and forced vulnerable young people into their illegal activities. I think it is fair to say that for many years, practitioners, police and local authorities thought that the issue affected only young boys, but the harsh

reality is that children from every community and every background can be groomed by criminals for activities such as county lines.

Some vulnerable young people who become victims of criminal exploitation have chaotic backgrounds. That makes them vulnerable to grooming and child sexual exploitation by older men—sometimes family members and peers—who are already involved in county lines. The covid pandemic has shown that those criminals will stop at nothing to continue exploiting our young people, who are often so vulnerable. The role played by girls and young women in such activities often goes below the radar, and the fact that the data is so patchy is really concerning. The invisibility of gang-associated girls has dire consequences. Although I do not have time to go into that today, the sexual exploitation is masked by criminal activities, often at the hands of male perpetrators.

We have to ensure that we tackle and address such exploitation. I hope the Minister and the Government will respond to those clear recommendations, which will help us to address the problem. Will the Minister commit to solutions based on the reality of what we are dealing with and, instead of labelling those young people as “victims”, recognise that they are “victims of crimes”? Will she ensure that my vulnerable constituents do not continue to suffer, end up in prison and, in some cases, tragically lose their lives?

4.53 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing this important debate following the publishing of the independent report on child sexual exploitation by organised networks, which was released earlier this month.

Although I welcome the report, it absolutely fills me with fear—fear about what our communities are experiencing, and fear that that horrific crime is not being tackled with the severity that it deserves. In my view, the report, which I have read in detail, actually asks more questions than it answers. That illustrates that this issue is not being tackled with the progress and the urgency that it deserves. There is still a real lack of understanding about the complexities of this horrific crime. Victims and their families are still being left with no trust whatever in the organisations that should be there to protect them: the local authorities, our children's protection service and the police forces.

Six areas were covered by the report—Durham, Swansea, Warwickshire, St Helens, Tower Hamlets and Bristol—but the Bradford district was not included. I have been so vehemently encouraging an independent Rotherham and Jay-style report to be undertaken for the Bradford district. It is nearly 20 years since my predecessor, Ann Cryer, publicly talked about this with such passion, calling out the issue for what it was in the Keighley area, talking about grooming gangs and identifying that it was a minority of Pakistani Muslim men, predominately within my constituency, who were targeting young children. Of course, it is unfair for members of that community to be branded with the same accusation.

I regret to say that in the time since Ann Cryer raised these concerns, nothing has really changed. Last summer, a limited and light review was released in the Bradford district that focused on only five children who had been

[Robbie Moore]

sexually exploited over the last 20 years, which is just the tip of the iceberg. We all know what is going on: this report concludes what we have all been talking about, yet nothing is being done.

I urge the Government to put pressure on local leaders who have responsibility, such as Susan Hinchcliffe, the leader of Bradford Metropolitan District Council, and our new Mayor of West Yorkshire, to get behind my campaign to have a Rotherham-style inquiry, specifically focused on the child sexual exploitation that has been going on for far too long within the Bradford district, so we can get to grips with this issue once and for all.

4.56 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey.

Child sexual abuse is the greatest horror that exists in our country. For too long it has been ignored. There has been report after report, debate after debate—I think they are used for swatting flies, because nothing seems to happen.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), not only for securing this debate but for her tireless campaigning for years on this issue.

The perpetrators of these crimes are evil, twisted and pathetic individuals working together in gangs. They target children with disabilities or children in care. Through no fault of their own, such children are more vulnerable, and the report sets out that these are the two indicators of heightened vulnerability to child sexual abuse. The Government should be doing all they can to support such children, not just to save them from the evil abuse discussed today but to give them better life chances.

In my constituency, we have a lot of children in care, not just local children. Many children have been relocated from other areas of the country, and they are sometimes as far as 200 miles away from their homes. These children from other areas often get placed in unregulated homes or exempted properties. It happens because of the cheaper housing available in the north, which is bought for this very purpose. Councils that are having their budgets consistently cut and areas with skyrocketing house prices see that there is no other choice but to place children out of borough, without support, often miles away. All too often, they are unsupported and exploited.

As the report shows, out-of-area persons are most at risk, with these children moved away from any support networks that were previously available to them. Evil perpetrators follow them to their new areas. The Government need to step in and resource the people with responsibility at local level. They need funding and quality accommodation to keep the children in their own locality, if that is the right place for them to be. Councils should always have the necessary funding to place these children in regulated, supported care.

One of the most shocking findings in this report is that a third of child sexual abuse cases involve disability. Predators select such children as their victims, some of whom do not have language skills so they cannot describe what is happening to them. It is calculated, twisted and

evil. I support the recommendations in the report, but would go further and say that no child should be placed in unregulated, unsupported accommodation.

The Government need to step their act up on this, and treat the children with the respect and care they should be rightfully afforded. Yes, there are mistakes at local level, but there are not the resources to provide the accommodation that is needed.

4.59 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing this debate.

Child sexual abuse is an issue of the greatest importance to my constituents in Rother Valley given the atrocities that took place in Rotherham. We must learn the lessons of the past in Rotherham and implement the recommendations of the independent inquiry's report fully and without delay. One recommendation is that the Government should publish an enhanced version of their child exploitation disruption toolkit, update guidance on child sexual exploitation, including the identification and response to child sexual exploitation perpetrated by networks or groups, and improve the categorisation of risk and harm by local authorities.

It is clear that we need to strengthen the criminal justice system in cases of child sexual abuse, and we need better identification of and response to abuse by local authorities. My courageous constituent Sammy Woodhouse, a survivor of Rotherham CSE, has been campaigning to pass Sammy's law, which would pardon child sexual abuse victims for crimes they were coerced into committing as a result of their abuse, removing those crimes from their criminal record. I think we should look at that. Furthermore, the Government must introduce a child criminal and sexual exploitation commissioner to address child abuse of a sexual, physical and mental nature, tackling criminal exploitation, trafficking, modern slavery and forced labour by gangs and individuals.

We must also establish a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation, which would send a strong message that children who are forced to commit crimes are victims rather than criminals and empower authorities to tackle child exploitation effectively and decisively. A key part of the recommendations is that police forces and local authorities must collect specific data on sex, ethnicity and disability in all cases of known or suspected child sexual exploitation, including by networks. A key factor of the horror show in Rotherham was that local agencies turned a blind eye to the sexual abuse of young predominantly white girls by hundreds of men of predominantly Pakistani heritage.

An Independent Office for Police Conduct investigation found that in Rotherham, police ignored the sexual abuse of children for decades for fear of increasing "racial tensions", while council employees and whistleblowers were cowed for revealing the truth by accusations of racism. Time and again the issue was raised with Rotherham Council and South Yorkshire police at all levels. However, the victims and concerned parties were ignored and even vilified. We must collect a breakdown of data on offenders and victims, as ethnic considerations and political sensibilities must never again serve as an excuse to cover up and ignore such hideous crimes.

It is clear to everyone present that the independent inquiry's report is a vital tool in the fight against child sexual exploitation in our communities, and we must now fully action the recommendations with urgency and great vigour. I urge the Minister to help increase sentencing for perpetrators of these horrific crimes.

5.2 pm

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to take part in this debate on a deeply traumatic but very important subject, which cannot and should not ever be ignored. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for her ongoing work on CSE and for the bravery and commitment she has shown in tackling the subject over a number of years. I know that it has not been easy.

As the IICSA report states, despite receiving a welcome higher profile in recent years, some of the processes in place to identify and deal with child sexual exploitation have created an institutional hesitancy to intervene and take the necessary action to protect children and catch perpetrators. We cannot be hesitant in addressing the issue, and any denial about the scale of child sexual exploitation either nationally or locally must be challenged.

Sadly, child sexual exploitation is not unique to any part of the country or to any community. West Yorkshire police recently charged 42 people with non-recent offences—many of them from my constituency of Batley and Spen. A further 29 individuals have been arrested. I agree with detectives in Kirklees when they urge victims to come forward, knowing that they will be listened to and that the matters they report will be fully investigated by specialist officers. If we are to treat this issue with the seriousness it demands, we must provide additional resources to the police and to social services to investigate historical cases, so that that does not come at the expense of investigating current cases.

Offenders will go where they think children are most vulnerable and open to manipulation, so more national support is needed to help identify perpetrators and victims of online grooming. Justice delayed is justice denied. Currently victims have to wait too long for cases to come to trial. That adds enormous stress during what is already another hugely challenging time for them and it prevents them from getting on with their lives, so the backlog of cases must be dealt with as a matter of urgency. Once the trial is over, victims and survivors should not be left unsupported. Effective long-term post-trial resources need to be put in place within the health and social care systems.

To help communities that have been affected, and where suspects and perpetrators come from, to understand the issues, we need more education programmes and community projects to support both the survivors of CSE and the families of perpetrators and those who are accused of these crimes—an often overlooked group who face their own traumatic and life-changing experiences, though in a very different way. There have been many failings in cases of CSE, and that is simply not acceptable. Although I do feel reassured by the conversations I have had with West Yorkshire police and Kirklees Council during my relatively short time in office that they will leave no stone unturned in their investigations into CSE, we must all continue to work hard to ensure that we learn from the mistakes of the past, and build on the

work of the independent inquiry and the Truth Project to find and prosecute the perpetrators and support all survivors of these heinous crimes.

5.5 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this very important debate, Ms McVey. I thank the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for all she has done, and also Professor Alexis Jay OBE for all her work on this national inquiry. In her words:

“Any denial of the scale of child sexual exploitation—either at national level or locally...must be challenged.”

It is that issue that I want to talk about today.

Seven years ago when I became an MP, victims came to me and said that they wanted to be heard. They said that they wanted people to know what had happened to them, and they wanted a local inquiry into what happened in Telford. The response of the authorities was, “There's nothing to see here now. It is all in the past; we have learnt the lessons.” In fact, what shocked me at the time and is even more shocking today is that the council leader used his position—his local power—to prioritise protecting the reputation of the council. The council published on its website an open letter to the Home Secretary, setting out why no CSE inquiry was needed in Telford, and arranged for 10 important men to sign that letter. It was signed by the council leader, the chief executive of the council, the director of children's services, the cabinet member for children's services, the chair of the safeguarding board, the chief officer of the health board, and even West Mercia's police and crime commissioner. To be clear, the very people who should have prioritised protecting young women and girls in Telford signed a letter saying, “There is nothing to see here now.”

At that time, those 10 men had not met a victim of CSE. Most of them are no longer in post, and I am grateful for that. The council leader, Councillor Shaun Davies—who will not mind a namecheck, as he has never been averse to self-publicity—was using political power to silence vulnerable, powerless women and girls: my constituents, victims of CSE who wanted their voices heard. I pay tribute to all those who joined Telford victims to campaign for a Telford-specific CSE inquiry, and to the determination and bravery of the victims who made that inquiry happen. We in Telford are very fortunate that the then Minister for local government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), took up this case and ensured that the campaign for a local inquiry was successful.

Now, almost six years later—six years!—the inquiry into CSE in Telford is about to report. The culture of denial must end, and these women's voices must be heard. There must be no more obstacles put in the way of transparency, and of bringing this issue into this place and to the attention of those in positions of power. I thank the hon. Member for Rotherham for all she has done to shine a light on those who would rather have institutional denial and institutional blindness. It must end, and this debate helps to achieve that goal.

5.8 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion). As she knows, I greatly admire her for her determination

[Jim Shannon]

to make changes to the system, not simply for her own constituents—which she clearly has—but for all the children and young men and women across the United Kingdom. I truly believe that her work and her passion for this topic will result in the changes that are needed to protect our youth from criminal grooming gangs.

I share the grave concern of many Members regarding making the long-term changes that are needed. I am thankful that the report clearly highlighted the need to end unregulated care homes for under-18s: too often over the years, I have had in my office young people who have been used and abused with no oversight and no sign of help. I am a long-standing advocate for a different way of helping these vulnerable young people who are cared for. However, many cared-for children who turn 18 are groomed due to the fact that they are unprotected, and there must be a continuance of care and support for those children. Turning 18 does not mean that a person is no longer a target for sexual exploitation, as the hon. Member for Rotherham said in her introduction—that was one of the things that struck me right away.

I am gratified that colleagues in the Northern Ireland Assembly are currently passing the Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Bill, which seeks to criminalise masquerading as a child online and strengthen revenge pornography laws, as well as excluding the public from all serious offence hearings and introducing anonymity for defendants before they are charged. I know that is not the Minister's responsibility, but I wanted to bring what we are doing in Northern Ireland into the conversation.

Ultimately there must be closer interaction between the police and the Crown Prosecution Service. We must provide communities and churches with the training needed to spot child exploitation, as well as the knowledge of how to deal with it. We very much need uniformed, clear steps that leave a network of invested, interested and informed volunteers who know what to look out for, and that takes funding and guidance from Government.

The loss of innocence is one of the saddest things I have ever read in the face of a victim of abuse. Indeed, one lady whom I knew very well in my office—I got to know her over the years—had the most vile trauma inflicted on her as a baby and a young child. For her and many others like her, I support the hon. Member for Rotherham and the calls for this House, our Government and our Minister to do more.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I thank all Members for keeping to the time limit, which was imposed because so many people wanted to speak. We will now come to the Front Benchers, who will have eight minutes each, and then Sarah Champion will wind up.

5.11 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Thank you, Ms McVey. It is not just a privilege to serve alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion); it is also really inspiring to work alongside her on these issues, and it is no surprise that it is her who has called today's debate.

From point of view of the Labour party, we would want to see every single recommendation in the report implemented in full. My hon. Friend described many of

these reports as being used to swat flies, which is how it feels to somebody who has been working on this for a decade. It feels like lots and lots of words have been written and literally no progress has been made. The Labour party would also support absolutely every single one of my hon. Friend's recommendations that go further.

One of the things that is absolutely maddening about trying to interact with—I am going to say any part of the Home Office, on anything—is the issue of data, and the complete and utter lack of it. As someone who is very long in the tooth in this area—I worked with Barnardo's and set up sexual exploitation services across the midlands over a decade ago—the thing that shocked me was the issue around disability that was found in this report: the vast number of children, especially those with autism, found by the report but not borne out by the data. There is no data on that.

We count what we care about in this country. Why on earth are we not counting? Why on earth—to the point made by the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford)—do we not have a full and complete dataset on both perpetrators and victims in this case? I cannot ring the Home Office today and say, "How many people from this area have come forward about sexual exploitation? How many of them have a disability?" I would be surprised if I could even get the gender data. What I would get is: "Oh, we don't collect that and it's going to take us too long." This is an absolutely fundamental problem. It is a failing that has been raised again and again and again. I ask the Minister: please, please stand up and say that the Government commit to this—it is literally a form that the police have to fill in. It is not that onerous, and the data is so vital to our ability to tackle this.

Another area—where I am afraid to say the similarity with almost every other part of my men's violence against women brief carries over—is the very shocking findings in the report about the

"difficulties...in identifying networks or groups of abusers,"

and the fact that police forces were "not able to provide" evidence of networks. The report states:

"The Inquiry was particularly struck by the reporting that there were no known or reported organised networks in two of the case study areas."

We have spent so much time and we have come a long way, actually. If I were to say one thing has changed in the last 10 years, it is that we are much better at knowing that there are victims everywhere. What we have made no progress on is trying to actually monitor and manage, let alone identify, the offenders for these crimes. It is the same with rape. It is the same with domestic abuse. There is the report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services about domestic abuse. The report that is due to come out on Friday about rape will inevitably say the same thing—as if I do not already know what it is going to say, but one has to make the pretence.

This report says the same thing, which is that there is a fundamental flaw in the monitoring and managing of known and repeat offenders. In looking at serial offenders in crimes by men against women, HMICFRS found that most police force areas had not been monitoring or offender-managing the most serial and violent perpetrators at all, and that is exactly what is happening in these cases.

I say that as somebody who is currently in the middle of supporting the most difficult and complex case that I have ever seen in my life, and I have seen many cases. If the woman were standing here, she would tell us that nothing has changed in the last 10 years. Ten years ago, she was 13, and that was when she started to be abused. That is when the same gang that is currently abusing her started—10 years ago. She is now 23 years old, and I have to see her for hours every week to try to get her to the point of view of trust. It is exactly like when I met with the victims in Telford. This woman says exactly the same thing to me, and it goes exactly to the point that was made about court procedures being too slow. She says, “You can’t keep me safe if I come forward. You might lock up this one person, although you won’t even necessarily put him on remand”—absolutely not with the court process at the moment; he is less likely to be sent on remand—“but what about that one, and what about him, and what about this man, and what about the 50 men who raped me last week?” This is not the movies—there is no witness cabin that they can go to in the woods. What the women in Telford told me was, “You can’t guarantee my safety. I won’t come forward.”

Lucy Allan: Is the hon. Lady aware that in Telford we have had a series of car fire-bombings related exactly to this, which have put victims in fear? I thank her for raising that point.

Jess Phillips: Absolutely. This is the exact same issue as in the cases that I have handled over the years. The offenders know. I have seen messages saying, “We can see you’ve been to the police station.” That should be evidence enough and yet it is not. This is the reality for victims.

I want to stress the point that was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham and others that the Minister could say she was going to go away and stop, literally today, the use of unregulated accommodation for children aged 16 and 17. It feels like we are about five years into that being requested. This situation has come about—the debate in the main Chamber is exactly the same debate as is currently going on here—entirely because of the squeeze on the availability of regulated, well-provided, decent accommodation in this space. I say as somebody who used to run that accommodation that there has been a retraction in it that has made it profitable. Imagine thinking, “I’m going to get a house full of kids who have been sexually exploited, because it’ll be a nice tidy earner.” As a taxpayer, I do not want to be paying for that. The Government should rule it out today. They should say that this will never happen again. When the Minister says that there is enough money in the system for it not to be happening, perhaps she can enlighten us as to why it is happening.

While I have this opportunity, I will just take one second to say that we have to do considerably more to stop the cliff edge that does not even happen at 18 but happens at 16, because for these children, it stays with them forever.

5.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Rachel Maclean): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey, and it is a pleasure to follow all the other hon. Members here, who have championed with great passion and expertise the need to address this horrendous issue.

I will start by echoing other Members in thanking the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing the debate. I thank everyone else who has participated: my hon. Friends the Members for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) and for Keighley (Robbie Moore); the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi); the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer); my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford); the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater); my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan); and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

The hon. Member for Rotherham is a long-standing leader, as others have rightly said, in campaigning for change in how services respond to CSE, both in her constituency and more widely across the country. There was a huge strength of feeling across the Chamber; one cannot speak about this issue without being affected on a very deep level. It disgusts and appals us all. That is why we commissioned the sweeping report back in 2015 and put resources behind it, and it is why we are considering the findings of the report and all the other reports and mechanisms that have shone a light on this issue.

It is right that we pay tribute to victims and survivors. My hon. Friend the Member for Telford said that they wanted to be heard, and we have allowed them to get their voices on the record. I think that is a vital first stage towards seeing the change that we all want to see. We do not want to see other children going through the horrendous ordeals that those victims and survivors have experienced.

We are committed to tackling all forms of child sex abuse. Our approach is underpinned by the strategy that we published just over a year ago, which sets out firm commitments to drive action across every part of Government. We all recognise that this is a cross-cutting issue; it does not just sit with me in the Home Office. That is why we need a whole-system approach. It is not just about central Government; it is also about those local authorities and agencies up and down the country that have been provided with powers, resources and funding to carry out their statutory duty of safeguarding the children in their community. All of us here, including me, have a responsibility to do everything in our power to protect our children.

We set up this inquiry because we recognised that there were failings. There was no institutional denial from the Home Office; my predecessors were willing to have this report to uncover the abuses that were going on. I thank the inquiry team for the work that they are doing to improve the response to CSE.

I turn to the form of offending highlighted in the most recent report from IICSA, which has rightly generated public concern, as seen in Rotherham. The report highlighted that the impact of this vile crime has been exacerbated by organisations’ and agencies’ widespread failures to respond to and tackle exploitation due to misplaced social and cultural sensitivities. We must not shirk our responsibility to address those failures in an open and transparent way. The hon. Member for Rotherham summarised the key recommendations made by IICSA in the report. Let me reassure her and everybody else that we will consider all the inquiry’s findings, and

[*Rachel Maclean*]

will respond—as required—to the recommendations within six months, which is the timeframe that was set out.

The hon. Member looks unhappy. I understand that—of course she does. I wish I could wave a magic wand, but she knows that these are systemic, complex issues that involve local authorities, policing and the Crown Prosecution Service. It would be trite of me to say, “Yes, I can fix that tomorrow.” How can I possibly do that?

Sarah Champion: Will the Minister give way?

Rachel Maclean: I will, but I do have a lot to get on the record on the specific points that were raised.

Sarah Champion: I winced because, in the six months that it will take the Government to consider the report and decide whether they are going to accept the recommendations, how many more children will be abused? This has been going on for too long.

Rachel Maclean: We all share the same passion, and none of us wants to see this happening. If we could fix it overnight I am sure that we would all do so. However, I want to reassure the hon. Member, and everybody else listening to the debate, that it is not the case that nothing is happening as we wait for those recommendations. I want to come to the substantive points that she has made; let me provide specific reassurances about all those points.

On sentencing, the hon. Member states that the law must change to recognise exploitation by two or more offenders. The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which is already going through the House, will deliver legislative reforms that will ensure that sexual and violent offenders serve sentences that truly reflect the severity of their crimes. I hope that the Bill will command the support of all of her party colleagues. We will, of course, carefully consider the inquiry’s recommendation on this issue, and we will work with Ministry of Justice colleagues to establish whether there is more to be done. I am sure there will be more conversations in that area.

I welcome the recommendation on the disruption toolkit, which was a key commitment in the strategy. We are on track to publish that toolkit later this year, as was set out in the strategy. That will help police and frontline professionals to better assess and tackle offending in their areas, including through the effective use of accurate and up-to-date problem profiles, which the hon. Member referred to.

The hon. Member stated that the Government must change the definition of CSE in statutory guidance. I must stress that the current definition does not require any form of “exchange”; that is only one element that may help to alert professionals to CSE taking place. However, we will of course work with the Department for Education on any changes to the statutory guidance that are needed as we consider the recommendations.

The hon. Member rightly said that the report has shone a light on the need for agencies to be absolutely clear on the difference between children being at risk of exploitation and children already being harmed. That is a crucial distinction. We are working to ensure that

frontline professionals are assessing children’s needs appropriately. Only today, the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse, which is funded by the Home Office, has introduced further guidance on how to talk to children who might have been sexually abused, helping frontline professionals to ensure that all children are effectively safeguarded.

Several Members mentioned data collection. They rightly highlighted that improving data on offenders and how they operate in different local areas is essential for ensuring an effective response to these awful crimes. That is why the Home Office has introduced a requirement for police forces to record the ethnicity of anyone held in custody for suspected involvement in CSE offences, which will become mandatory in March.

On care homes, the Government are clear that semi-independent provision can never meet the needs of children under the age of 16; the Department for Education has already banned the use of those settings. When they are the right option for some older children, high-quality provision must be available. The Government have recently announced the introduction of mandatory national standards, a new regime of robust accountability from Ofsted and over £142 million of investment.

I have noted some other points that the hon. Member for Rotherham made, which I will respond to. She mentioned the issue of victims from ethnic minority communities. The Home Office-funded prevention programme is delivering targeted work in those communities to raise awareness of child exploitation and to support professionals. I have a lot more to say, but I will probably have to write to the hon. Member about the other points she mentioned; I want to address her point about the court system.

On the trusted relationships funding in Rotherham, we are very happy to take that point up with officials and see if there is anything we can do to ensure continuity. I want to be clear that when that funding was launched, it was clear that it was a bespoke four-year fund. We wanted to gather very good evidence to see what we were spending the money on and to test that it was working. That has happened. Many other local areas have commissioned follow-up work, and we very much hope that we can get to that point with Rotherham.

I think that we are all shocked and disgusted by the situation with Lord Ahmed. Although I was not aware of this particular issue until the hon. Member for Rotherham raised it, so I have not had an opportunity to do extensive research on why he is still allowed to use his title, I personally find that disgusting and shocking, and I would like to see that title removed. I do not know what legislative options I have at my disposal, but I will meet Cabinet Office Ministers and make the case for that.

I think that I have used up my time, so I will follow anything else up with the hon. Member.

5.28 pm

Sarah Champion: I thank the Minister for her response and I would appreciate a follow-up letter, if that is possible.

Recently, I watched the four-part series on Jeffrey Epstein and I was chilled. The methods that he used were exactly the same as the methods that we are seeing here. This issue is not about class, it is not about race,

and it is not about religion. This is about child abusers using their position of power and influence to exploit children, and it must be dealt with wherever it is seen.

The Minister is right—there is, to be honest, a siloed approach, and Departments need to work collaboratively to address that. It is currently a postcode lottery as to whether a child’s local police force or local authority recognise that they are being exploited and have support in place for them. That has to stop, which is why I called on the Minister to ensure that there is a national service rather than it just being down to luck based on someone’s local police and crime commissioner.

For me, the fundamental point is that we should always start by listening to the victims and survivors. They know what the problem is; they know what the solution is. The result that they are actually asking for tends to be quite simple.

I do not know of any other crime where, if someone went to the police and reported it, the police officer would say, “Really?” If I went to the police and reported that my car had been stolen, the officer would not say,

“Really? Are you sure? Are you sure you didn’t steal your own car?” Yet that is what happens time and time again with child abuse and with all sexual abuse.

My final point is that someone is still a child up to the age of 18. If the Government recognise that unregulated care is not good enough for children aged from zero to 16, then it is not good enough for children aged from 16 to 18 either, and I urge the Minister to reconsider that situation.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I thank all Members for taking part today; it has been a most moving debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse report on child sexual exploitation by organised networks.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 23 February 2022

PARLIAMENTARY WORKS SPONSOR BODY

Restoration and Renewal Programme: Essential Scheme Initial Assessment of Cost and Schedule and Continued Presence Impact Study

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside), representing the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body: The Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body has today deposited a paper in the Library of both Houses, entitled “Essential Scheme: Initial Assessment of Cost and Schedule; and Continued Presence: Impact Study”, following the request of the House of Commons Commission to make available this information for consideration by both Houses. This has also been published on the Restoration and Renewal website at: <https://restorationandrenewal.uk/resources/reports/essential-scheme-initial-assessment-of-cost-and-schedule>.

The Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority have been working to the mandate set out in the resolutions of both Houses in early 2018 and the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019 to prepare a detailed and costed plan, known as the Programme Business Case, for the works to restore and renew the Palace of Westminster.

The approach to developing a Programme Business Case, and objectives for key aspects of the two potential schemes, were confirmed and agreed with the House Commissions following a Strategic Review of the Restoration and Renewal Programme in early 2021. That Programme Business Case was planned to be presented to both Houses in 2023 and, as part of the normal process of developing such a Business Case, information has been regularly shared between the Delivery Authority and Sponsor Body for review, scrutiny, challenge and guidance.

In recent months, the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority had, for the first time, brought together an initial consolidated view of a preliminary cost and schedule range for an option known as the R&R Essential Scheme. This initial assessment reflects emerging thoughts, approximately half way through the planned period for developing the Programme Business Case. This does not represent a formal cost estimate and remains subject to a considerable amount of further work, which had been planned for the year ahead.

The deposited paper sets out the initial assessment of cost and schedule for the essential scheme and also the continued presence impact study, which sets out the potential impact on the programme, including its cost and schedule, were the House of Commons to maintain a presence in the Palace during the building works. The potential cost and schedule ranges include significant allowances for cost and schedule contingency to allow for the range of risks inherent in such a complex programme of works, and to account for the early stage of the analysis. The estimates of contingency for the schedule and cost were derived following good practice guidance in the development of business cases.

[HCWS626]

DEFENCE

Non-UK Service Personnel Settlement Fees: Public Consultation Outcome

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): This is a joint statement with the Secretary of State for the Home Office (Pritti Patel).

Last year we announced that a public consultation would be held seeking views on a policy proposal for the Government to waive settlement fees for non-UK service personnel who met certain criteria should they apply to remain in the UK at the end of their military service; views were also sought on the scope of the policy.

The public consultation ran for six weeks from 26 May to 7 July 2021 and attracted a significant amount of interest from Service Personnel, veterans, families, service support organisations and members of the public. The level of interest demonstrates how important this issue is to many and confirms that the Government’s policy proposal to waive settlement fees for non-UK service personnel who meet certain criteria is the right thing to do.

After careful consideration of the responses, the Government have decided that a fee waiver will be introduced and will apply to:

- Non-UK service personnel who have served for at least six years and meet all other Home Office suitability criteria;
- non-UK service personnel discharging due to an illness or injury which is attributable to service, irrespective of the length of their service and providing they meet all other Home Office suitability criteria; and
- non-UK veterans who are currently living in the UK who have not regularised their immigration status and had served for at least six years or had been discharged due to an illness or injury which was attributable to service and meet all other Home Office suitability criteria.

The Government response to the consultation will be published on the gov.uk website on 23 February 2022. The fee waiver will be implemented by the Home Office in the spring 2022 fees regulations changes and there will be further communications explaining the changes in due course.

We welcome this change and believe it is a positive step which will assist those non-UK service personnel who wish to remain in the UK after their service in the armed forces to do so.

Attachments can be viewed online at:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2022-02-23/HCWS624>

[HCWS624]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Culture in England: Levelling Up

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ms Nadine Dorries): The “Levelling Up” White Paper outlined the Government’s intention to tackle cultural disparities and ensure that everyone, wherever they live, has the opportunity to enjoy the incredible benefits of culture in their lives. I am therefore pleased

to announce a series of measures which will transform the landscape for arts and culture, to ensure that it benefits everyone. These measures build on a range of funding provided by the Government to support culture, including the unprecedented culture recovery fund—the largest investment in the arts in this country’s history—and are as follows:

Increased funding for Arts Council England to support Levelling Up

The “Levelling Up” White Paper explained that additional funding announced at spending review 2021 for Arts Council England will be invested in creativity and culture. This extra funding will be invested in levelling up areas over the next three years, including via the Arts Council’s 2023-26 national portfolio funding round. The national portfolio is a group of organisations that gets regular funding from taxpayers via the Arts Council.

Levelling Up for Culture Places

DCMS and Arts Council England have identified over 100 Levelling Up for Culture Places, based on areas of historically low cultural engagement and spending. Where possible, Arts Council England will prioritise its increased spending in these places over the spending review period, April 2022 to March 2025. This will ensure that more people and places have access to cultural and creative opportunities. A list of these places will be published on Arts Council England’s website.

Increasing support for Levelling Up

The organisations which receive the greatest level of public subsidy, all of which are nationally and internationally renowned, will be expected to increase the total proportion of their combined impact in Levelling Up for Culture Places by 15% by March 2026.

Support for expansion outside London

Arts Council England will detail plans to support London-based applicants which wish to move, expand, or establish new activity outside London. For some organisations, this will be an opportunity to establish themselves in some of the many other brilliantly creative parts of the country. It is right that organisations which constitute the national portfolio help to deliver a truly national cultural offering.

We want arts and culture to be open and accessible to everybody. Cultural funding comes from taxpayers across the country, so people across the country should all have the opportunity to enjoy it—whether as artists, audiences, educators, or the new generations of talented people who will help to sustain and extend the creative brilliance for which our country is rightly renowned. The measures we are announcing today will help to make that happen.

[HCWS621]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19 Vaccine Programme

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): The covid-19 vaccination programme continues to protect the nation against the virus. As of 19 February 2022 over 139 million doses have been provided, including 52.5 million first doses,

48.8 million second doses and 37.9 million third primary and booster doses in the UK. This represents uptake of 91.4% for the first dose, 85% for the second dose and 66.1% for the third primary and booster doses thus far.

Vaccines remain the best protection against the virus and have enabled the gradual and safe removal of restrictions over the past year. As the Government published their “living with covid-19” strategy earlier this week, vaccines continue to be at the heart of the Government’s approach to living with the virus in the future. Therefore, we urge everyone to play their part by taking up the covid-19 vaccine and booster offer without delay.

The independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) has published further advice on the covid-19 vaccination programme. Her Majesty’s Government (HMG) has accepted this advice and I am informed that all four parts of the UK intend to follow the JCVI’s advice.

Universal Offer to Children aged 5 to 11:

Children without underlying health conditions are at low risk of serious illnesses from covid-19 and the priority remains for the NHS to offer vaccines to adults and vulnerable young people, as well as to catch-up with other childhood immunisation programmes.

At this time, the JCVI has advised a non-urgent offer of two 10 micrograms doses of the Pfizer covid-19 vaccine to children aged five to 11 years of age who are not in a clinical risk group. The two doses should be offered with an interval of at least 12 weeks between doses. This offer will continue to ensure good protection against potential future waves of covid-19 as we learn to live with this virus.

The NHS is working through updated guidance and will set out how this is going to be operationalised, with deployment expected to begin in due course.

As we learn to live with covid-19 in the UK, the JCVI will review whether, in the longer term, an offer of vaccination to this, and other paediatric age groups, continues to be advised.

As we have done throughout the covid-19 vaccination programme, we will continue to provide information and encouragement to the parents and carers of eligible children to ensure that they make the best decision for their children, whatever it may be. Every parent will have the opportunity to make an informed choice based on their own personal circumstances.

Spring and autumn vaccination programmes:

We know that winter is a time when the threat from covid-19 could be greatest both for individuals and for the NHS. The JCVI has given interim advice that there should be an autumn 2022 programme of vaccinations for those who are at higher risk of severe covid-19; such as the elderly and in clinical risk groups. The JCVI will be offering definitive advice on any recommended autumn programme nearer the time.

However, many of the oldest, and therefore most vulnerable, will have received their most recent vaccine dose in September and October 2021. These individuals are at higher risk of severe covid-19 due to waning of vaccine-induced immunity prior to an autumn programme.

As a precautionary strategy, and to maintain protection in the most vulnerable, the JCVI advises that a spring dose, around six months after the last vaccine dose, should be offered to:

adults aged 75 years and over, and residents living in care homes for older adults; and

individuals aged 12 years and over who are immunosuppressed, as defined in the UK

Health Safety Agency's (UKHSA) Green Book.

Eligible individuals aged 18 years and over may be offered a booster vaccination with 30mcg Pfizer/BioNTech (Comirnaty) vaccine or 50mcg Moderna (Spikevax) vaccine. Eligible individuals aged 12 to less than 18 years may be offered a booster vaccination with 30 mcg Pfizer/BioNTech (Comirnaty) vaccine.

With the vaccine offer to all those aged five to 11 years and the spring dose offer to the most vulnerable, I am now updating the House on the liabilities HMG has taken on in relation to further vaccine supply via this statement and the Departmental Minutes laid in Parliament containing a description of the liability undertaken. The agreement to provide indemnity with deployment of further doses increases the statutory contingent liability of the covid-19 vaccination programme.

Deployment of effective vaccines to eligible groups has been and remains a key part of the Government's strategy to manage covid-19. Willingness to accept the need for appropriate indemnities to be given to vaccine suppliers has helped to secure access to vaccines, with the expected benefits to public health and the economy alike, much sooner than may have been the case otherwise.

Given the exceptional circumstances we are in, and the terms on which developers have been willing to supply a covid-19 vaccine, we along with other nations have taken a broad approach to indemnification proportionate to the situation we are in.

Even though the covid-19 vaccines have been developed at pace, at no point and at no stage of development has safety been bypassed. The MHRA has approved the use of the Pfizer/BioNTech (Comirnaty) and Moderna (Spikevax) covid-19 vaccines. These vaccines have satisfied, in full, all the necessary requirements for safety, effectiveness, and quality.

We are providing indemnities in the very unexpected event of any adverse reactions that could not have been foreseen through the robust checks and procedures that have been put in place.

I will update the House in a similar manner as and when other covid-19 vaccines or additional doses of vaccines already in use in the UK are deployed.

HM Treasury has approved the proposal in principle.

[HCWS628]

David Fuller: Independent Inquiry

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Following my statement on 16 December 2021 I wish to update the House about the independent Inquiry which is investigating the circumstances surrounding the offences committed by David Fuller at Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS

Trust. The inquiry will help us understand how these offences took place without detection, identify any areas where swift action is necessary and consider wider national issues, including for the NHS.

Sir Jonathan Michael, who chairs the independent inquiry, developed draft terms of reference in January 2022 which set out the scope of the inquiry. He has since sought the views of affected families on the draft terms of reference.

The Inquiry has today, 23 February 2022 published its final terms of reference which can be found at: <https://fuller.independent-inquiry.uk/terms-of-reference>.

I have placed a copy of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS625]

Maternity Services Improvement: Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Following the Baby Loss Awareness Week debate on 23 September 2021, I wish to update the House on progress with work to improve safe and equitable outcomes for women and families using maternity services.

The Government's maternity ambition is to halve the 2010 rates of stillbirth, neonatal and maternal deaths and brain injuries in babies occurring during or soon after birth by 2025. The ambition also includes reducing the rate of pre-term births from 8% to 6%. Mothers and Babies: Reducing Risk through Audits and Confidential Enquiries across the UK (MBRRACE-UK) have published several reports which provide some insight on progress towards meeting our ambition.

The last two years have been challenging but I am pleased to report on the good progress made with reducing stillbirths and neonatal deaths. According to Office for National Statistics data, the stillbirth rate has fallen 25% from 5.1 stillbirths per 1,000 in 2010 to 3.8 stillbirths per 1,000 births in 2020—unchanged since 2019—and the neonatal mortality rate for babies born from 24 weeks gestation has fallen 36% from 2.0 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2010 to 1.3 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2020.

In their perinatal mortality report published on 14 October 2021, MBRRACE-UK analysis has shown that the variation in stillbirth rates between NHS trusts has significantly reduced with 97% of trusts in England having stabilised and adjusted stillbirth rates within 5% of other trusts of similar size and case mix. The report suggested that this demonstrates "equitable healthcare provision across providers".

Maternity services are also getting better at improving and learning from cases of perinatal deaths. The MBRRACE-UK third annual report on use of the perinatal mortality review tool (PMRT), published on 13 October 2021, that the proportion of deaths reviewed has increased with an estimated 83% of cases of babies who died in the perinatal period having been reviewed during March 2020 to February 2021. The report also found an increase of multidisciplinary teams carrying out reviews and an increase in parent engagement during the reviews.

The MBRRACE-UK maternal mortality report, “Saving Lives, Improving Mothers’ Care 2021: Lessons learned to inform maternity care from the UK and Ireland Confidential Enquiries in Maternal Death and Morbidity 2017-2019”, published on 11 November 2021, found that the maternal mortality rate in the UK was 8.8 per 100,000 in 2017-19, compared to 10.6 per 100,000, which shows a 17.4% decrease from the 2009-2011 baseline.

More progress is needed to meet our ambition to reduce the rate of brain injuries in babies occurring during or soon after births. On 5 November 2021, I announced that £3 million has been awarded to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) in collaboration with the Royal College of Midwives (RCM) and the Healthcare Improvement Studies Institute at the University of Cambridge (THIS Institute) to deliver the second phase of a brain injury reduction programme.

Phase one of this programme, also being led by the RCOG, RCM and THIS Institute, is focusing on developing national consensus on how best to monitor a baby during labour and to escalate any concerns about deterioration. Phase two will focus on developing the clinical tools and training approaches needed for future implementation to standardise the identification and escalation of a deteriorating baby.

Despite the reductions in stillbirth, neonatal mortality and maternal mortality rates seen since 2010, the MBRRACE-UK surveillance reports show us that women and babies of black or Asian ethnicity or those living in the most deprived areas are more likely to die from causes linked to pregnancy and birth compared to women and babies of white ethnicity or those living in the least deprived areas.

I am committed to tackling disparities in health outcomes and experience of care. On 6 September 2021, equity and equality guidance was published which includes an analysis of evidence, interventions to improve equity and equality, resources, indicators and metrics. The guidance asks local maternity systems to submit an equity and equality analysis—covering health outcomes, community assets and staff experience—and co-produce equity and equality action plans.

In conjunction with the guidance, four pledges for women, babies and staff were also published. The four pledges include:

Pledge 1: The NHS will take action to improve equity for mothers and babies and race equality for NHS staff.

Pledge 2: Local Maternity Systems will set out plans to improve equity and equality.

Pledge 3: Local Maternity Systems will receive support to improve equity and equality.

Pledge 4: the NHS will measure progress towards the equity aims.

I am also pleased to announce that I am establishing a maternity disparities taskforce to tackle disparities and reduce maternal and neonatal deaths by improving access to effective preconception and maternity care for women from ethnic minorities and those living in the most deprived areas. This taskforce will also aim to address the wider social determinants that are linked to poorer outcomes such as poverty, housing and smoking, drinking and obesity in pregnancy.

We know that improving women’s health in the run-up to pregnancy and improving the support they receive are vital to improving health outcomes for mothers and their babies. The taskforce will bring together experts from across the health system, Government Departments and the voluntary sector to address disparities in maternal and neonatal outcomes. The taskforce will work to consider and support evidence-based individual, community, and targeted population interventions to tackle disparities and will develop key priorities that will be included as commitments in the women’s health strategy.

I hope to hold the first meeting of the taskforce in early March, and plan to hold the meetings every two months afterwards to maintain progress with delivery of actions and interventions to tackle disparities in maternal and neonatal outcomes.

Finally, as a nurse who worked during the pandemic, I know how incredibly challenging the last two years have been. Therefore, I would like to say a personal thank you to all maternity staff for their hard work and dedication throughout the covid-19 pandemic to provide safe and personalised care for all mothers and their babies.

I hope to update the House again regarding the progress towards the Government maternity ambition and progress of the maternity disparities taskforce in due course.

[HCWS623]

PRIME MINISTER

Prime Minister’s Oral Statement on Ukraine: Clarification

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): Further to my answer to the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) during my oral statement on Ukraine, it is the position that oligarchs at the heart of Putin’s inner circle and banks which have bankrolled the Russian occupation of Crimea have been targeted by the first wave of UK sanctions in response to Russia’s further violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty. As I said in my answer, these include Gennady Timchenko, Russia’s sixth richest oligarch, to whom she referred in her question, and Boris and Igor Rotenberg, two long-standing associates of the regime. In the event of further aggressive acts by Russia against Ukraine, we have prepared an unprecedented package of further sanctions ready to go. Further details can be found at: www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-hits-russian-oligarchs-and-banks-with-targeted-sanctions-foreign-secretary-statement

Roman Abramovich has not been the subject of targeted measures.

More generally anyone who comes to this country on an Israeli passport is a non-visa national. Israelis are required to obtain a visa if they want to live, work or study in the UK.

[HCWS627]

TRANSPORT**Light Dues 2022-23**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): A strong and growing maritime industry is vital to the economy of the United Kingdom and it is critical that we treasure and protect this vital artery if we are to remain a world-leading maritime centre.

The work of the general lighthouse authorities, which provide and maintain marine aids to navigation and respond to new wrecks and navigation dangers in some of the busiest waters in the world, is crucial to underpinning that vision while maintaining our vigorous safety record and continuously improving safety standards.

Light dues are paid by the shipping industry such that the general lighthouse authorities' costs are met without the need to call on the UK Exchequer.

Light dues have reduced by 40% in real terms since 2010 due to significant efficiency, and other, savings made by the general lighthouse authorities.

However, the unprecedented covid-19 pandemic has both added additional operational costs and led to a significant reduction in light dues income, reflecting the major impact it has also had on the shipping industry.

To ensure the general lighthouse authorities have the funding they need to complete their vital maritime safety work, I have therefore made the difficult decision to increase the light dues rate by two and a half pence to 41% per tonne for 2022-23.

Light dues remain lower than they were in 2010 in real terms and will continue to be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure that the general lighthouse authorities are challenged to provide an effective and efficient service which offers value for money to light dues payers.

[HCWS622]

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**not later than
Wednesday 2 March 2022**

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