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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 1 March 2022

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I remind hon. Members that books of solidarity for the people of Ukraine are available for Members, staff and all in the House to sign in Portcullis House and in the Library. I encourage everybody to show our solidarity with the people of Ukraine through these difficult times.

May I wish everybody a happy St David's day?

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Mental Health Services: Young People

1. **Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the availability of mental health services for young people. [905772]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): We are committed to ensuring that everyone with mental health needs has timely access to support and treatment. We remain committed to the expansion in mental health services in the NHS long-term plan, which should see 345,000 more children accessing services by 2023-24. To accelerate that expansion, we have provided an additional £79 million this year in recognition of the impacts of the pandemic.

Kate Green: The NHS long-term plan promises a "new approach to...mental health services for people aged 18-25". Could the Secretary of State set out in detail how university mental health and wellbeing services will work seamlessly with NHS mental health services so that students in need of support do not fall through the cracks?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady raises a very important point, especially as this week is Eating Disorders Awareness Week. Sadly, as she and many other hon. Members will know, eating disorders have increased significantly over the past couple of years.

Last year, during the pandemic, we published a mental health recovery action plan with an additional £500 million of funding, a minimum of £13 million of which was dedicated to young people between the ages of 18 and 25, particularly to help with the transition from children's to adult mental health services. My hon. Friend the Minister for Care and Mental Health has been in talks with the Department for Education and has a meeting soon to discuss what more action we can take collectively.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend made any specific assessment of the effect of the covid-19 lockdown restrictions on children's mental health and general wellbeing?

Sajid Javid: I can tell my hon. Friend that we have and that that assessment continues. Sadly, as he will know, we have seen a significant increase in mental health referrals, especially for young people, over the past two years. The extra support that we have provided through the action plan and the £500 million of funding is helping, but I am afraid that there will be some long-term challenges created by the pandemic. We are very much looking at what more we can do.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I echo the words of solidarity with Ukraine that many colleagues have shared in recent days.

There are stark inequalities in children's mental health services, from the postcode lottery of whether a child is ever seen after a referral to the luck-of-the-draw results of eating disorder treatment. Children from black and mixed-race backgrounds make up 11% of the population, but account for a staggering 36% of those detained in the highest-level mental health units. However, just 5% of those who access routine children's mental health services are black. That is unacceptable—something clearly is not working.

Labour will put a mental health support hub in every community and a specialist mental health staff member in every school. What are the Government going to do?

Sajid Javid: I think we all agree, across the House, about the importance of mental health services, especially for younger people. As for what the Government are doing, before the pandemic there was already a commitment to increase funding for mental health services in the NHS's long-term plan by an additional £2.3 billion a year. On top of that, there has been the response during the pandemic, with the mental health recovery action plan and the additional £500 million that I referred to a moment ago. When it comes to children's mental health services, there is £79 million included, which will pay for an extra 22,500 referrals.

NHS Capacity

2. **Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase NHS capacity. [905773]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): We have worked with the NHS to expand virtual wards and establish a new national discharge taskforce to safely maximise patient discharge and free up beds. We have also announced a delivery plan for tackling the covid-19 backlog of elective care, which sets out our clear vision for how an additional £8 billion will be spent over the next three years to help the NHS to recover and expand elective services.

Sir David Evennett: I thank my right hon. Friend for that information. As we look beyond the pandemic, our priority must be tackling the NHS waiting list. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the record number of doctors and nurses working in our NHS shows that the Government are putting the NHS on the best possible footing to meet the challenges ahead?

Sajid Javid: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. Let me take this opportunity once again to thank everyone who has been working in the NHS, especially for all that they have done during the pandemic. We are continuing to invest in the workforce through our 50,000-person expansion in the nurse programme, and we already have 44,000 more full-time employees in healthcare settings than we had this time last year, including 4,600 more doctors and 11,100 more nurses.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The lack of capacity in accident and emergency departments and other healthcare services is a major contributor to the ongoing ambulance waiting time crisis in my constituency. Will the Secretary of State meet me and representatives of the West Midlands ambulance service—as I have repeatedly asked him to do—to help to resolve the crisis?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is right to raise this matter. As she will know, owing to the pressures of the pandemic we have seen significant challenges for ambulance services throughout the country. Just a few days ago I met the head of the West Midlands ambulance service to discuss some of the issues, and also how the extra funding that we provided over the winter—some £55 million of support for ambulance services—is helping.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I press the Secretary of State on how the increases in NHS capacity will be maintained over the medium term? His own Department has forecast that waiting lists may hit 9 million or 10 million in the next couple of years. The Government also have a plan to take the extra funding coming from the increase in national insurance and the health and social care levy out of the NHS to fund our long-term social care plans. How are the two to be reconciled?

Sajid Javid: As my right hon. Friend will know, when I presented the NHS's elective recovery plan for the covid-19 backlog in the House a couple of weeks ago, I made it clear that we expect waiting lists to rise before they fall. That is because some 10 million people stayed away during the pandemic, and we want as many as possible of those who want and are able to come forward to do so. At the same time, the NHS will be massively increasing its activity, in new ways and with new funding. It is essential for there to be much greater integration between the NHS and social care, and we set our plans in detail in the White Paper published last week.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Karin Smyth.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The Government seem to think that there is some kind of magic staffing tree, but there is no increase in capacity, no elective recovery and no fixing of social care without an immediate and ambitious workforce plan. We have legislation in this place, and we have seen a tsunami of White Papers, but none of that includes a credible workforce plan. Given the estimated 93,000 NHS vacancies and more than 110,000 vacancies in social care, when will we have that plan?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady has just stood up and said that there is no increase in capacity. I am afraid she was probably not listening a few minutes ago when I said that in the last year the number of people working in the health service had increased by 44,000, and that we

had 11,000 more nurses and nearly 5,000 more doctors. As for a plan, the hon. Lady may know that I have already asked the NHS to work on a long-term plan—a 15-year workforce plan. If she really wanted a new workforce plan, she should have thought about how we could fund it, and should not have voted against the increase in spending that the Government proposed.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): On the subject of NHS capacity, data released by NHS Digital shows that NHS Bury clinical commissioning group had the lowest number and also the lowest percentage of face-to-face GP appointments in England in January 2022. Only 37% of Bury appointments are face-to-face, which is clearly unacceptable and unfair to my constituents. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me to find solutions to this serious problem?

Sajid Javid: It is a serious issue, and I will of course meet my hon. Friend to discuss it further. He may be interested to know that over the winter the Government provided an additional £250 million in a winter access fund for primary care services throughout the country. That has certainly helped to increase the number of face-to-face appointments, although the omicron wave made the process more challenging. As my hon. Friend suggests, it should ultimately be for patients to choose how they want to be seen.

Ethnic Inequalities in Healthcare

3. **Valerie Vaz** (Walsall South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the NHS Race and Health Observatory's February 2022 report on "Ethnic Inequalities in Healthcare". [905775]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): Addressing the disparities discussed in that report is one of my key priorities. We are already making progress in crucial areas such as increasing covid-19 vaccine take-up among ethnic minority groups. To go further, we also plan to publish a health disparities White Paper later this year that will set out impactful measures designed to address disparities and their causes, including those linked to ethnicity.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Secretary of State for his response. I hope he will ensure that he implements all the conclusions of that report. He is aware of the McLean review into the senior leadership of the Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust, who have now annexed the Walsall Manor Hospital. Can he say what he will do to ensure that all those working in the NHS and using the NHS are treated with equality and transparency, starting with the Manor?

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this issue. This is one of the most important issues and one of the biggest longer-term challenges to face the NHS. I welcome the report and I will be taking it very seriously. She will know that I have commenced action on ethnic disparities in healthcare. For example, I have asked for an investigation, headed by Dame Margaret Whitehead, into potential bias in medical devices. The right hon. Lady is also right to raise the importance of inequality of treatment, and I will shortly have more to say on that.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): This report is damning. The evidence shows that, over a decade of Conservative Government, we have not seen any significant change. Ethnic minority patients continue to receive poorer care because of their race at every stage of their life. The Tories have had 12 years to act. Why have they failed to do so?

Sajid Javid: The reason this report exists is that the Government want to see this kind of work being done by an independent organisation so that we can address these types of disparities and issues. There have been ethnic disparities in our health service for decades, sadly, under successive Governments, and it is this Government who are doing something about it. I have already referred to the medical devices review. Earlier this week, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), set out the maternity disparities taskforce, and we will have a lot more to say on this when we publish our forthcoming White Paper.

Covid-19 Lateral Flow Tests

4. **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the devolved Administrations on ending free-of-charge covid-19 lateral flow tests. [905776]

8. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the devolved Administrations on ending free-of-charge covid-19 lateral flow tests. [905780]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): In advance of the living with covid announcement on 21 February, ministerial colleagues discussed our living with covid strategy with the devolved Administrations. Officials were also in regular touch to understand the approach being taken by each Administration and any implementation issues.

Peter Grant: Happy St David's day to the people of Wales. The views of the Welsh Government—and of three of the four Governments of these islands—on this question are very clear. The Government in here appear to be in a minority of one, yet again. When someone takes a lateral flow test and reports a result, it does not do them any good at all, but it can have significant benefits for their friends, family and close contacts. When the results are reported in sufficiently large numbers, that can have significant wider public health benefits. With that in mind, what assessment has the Minister made of the likely reduction in the number of daily tests being taken if people have to pay for them, and how does that compare with the advice from all the UK's chief medical officers on the level of background asymptomatic testing that is advisable to give us the quickest possible warning of the next wave of a new variant of covid?

Maggie Throup: As the Prime Minister announced last week, free tests will continue until April. He also stated that if the SNP in Scotland wished to continue to offer free tests after that date, it is certainly at liberty to do so. I am proud that, because of the amazing success of the vaccination programme, covid rates are coming down, hospitalisations are coming down and deaths are coming down. It is because of that that we can now

live with covid and reduce the ongoing expense of testing and bring it to a proportionate and manageable scenario.

Alan Brown: Scottish taxpayers paid their contribution towards the provision of free lateral flow tests. Scotland is allocated its share of UK debt, yet we are supposed to believe that covid support is somehow at the benevolence of the UK Government. Now we see the UK Government, again, making a decision that directly affects Scotland because we have a fixed budget. The Minister says the SNP Government can continue to provide free lateral flow tests, but is it not the case that Scotland needs its own borrowing powers so that it has much more fiscal responsibility and the proper levers of power?

Maggie Throup: As far as I am aware, and I am pretty sure I am right, the Scottish Government already have tax-raising powers, so perhaps they could use them in this instance.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): The Department of Health and Social Care asked the Treasury for £5 billion to continue testing, which was refused, yet it has been revealed that the UK Treasury has effectively written off £4.3 billion given to fraudsters during the pandemic. Does the Minister think it is wrong to write off losses that have enriched fraudsters while refusing to support the continuation of free testing?

Maggie Throup: I assure the House that the Treasury has not written off anything.

Covid-19: Pharmaceutical Interventions

5. **Miriam Cates** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): What steps he is taking to build covid-19 defences through pharmaceutical interventions. [905777]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): Vaccines remain our best line of defence against covid-19. NHS staff and volunteers in our world-leading vaccination programme continue to work tirelessly, and I am sure the House thanks all of them. The offer of first, second and booster doses is always open. It is never too late to get jabbed.

We were the first country in the world to begin rolling out oral antivirals in the community, as part of a range of NHS antiviral and therapeutic treatment options to give us another line of defence. We are working hard to identify further safe and effective treatments through Government-funded national trials.

Miriam Cates: It was announced last month that covid vaccinations will be offered to healthy five to 11-year-olds, and the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation calculates that 2 million children in this age group will need to be vaccinated to prevent one intensive care unit admission, so any serious side effects occurring at a rate of more than one in 2 million would constitute a net harm. Given that reports of serious side effects, such as myocarditis, from other countries significantly exceed that rate, and given the lack of long-term safety data for the new vaccine, how confident are the Government that the vaccination of healthy five to 11-year-olds will do more good than harm?

Maggie Throup: We carefully considered and accepted the advice of the JCVI that the health benefits to five to 11-year-olds of a single dose of the covid-19 vaccine are greater than the potential health risks. I reassure the House that this is a non-urgent offer, and our priority is to continue vaccinating the most vulnerable.

NHS Managers: Performance and Efficiency

6. Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to help ensure high standards of performance and efficiency for managers in the NHS. [905778]

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): The NHS is recognised as one of the most efficient health services in the world. Between 2010 and 2018, productivity in the NHS grew faster than in the wider economy. However, there is always room to do more. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has commissioned a review led by Dame Linda Pollard and General Sir Gordon Messenger to explore health and social care leadership and management, including the drivers of performance and efficiency, and they will report back later this year.

Mr Sheerman: We have learned today that innocent children are being killed in Ukraine. I could not get the Ukrainian colours, but I am wearing my UNICEF tie.

We have brilliant nurses, doctors and support staff, but too often the management of hospitals is not as good as it should be to support them. The Topol review should be kept alive, but we should also make sure that the training of managers is of the utmost importance. A recent survey of the world's best hospitals had only one British hospital in the top 100: Guy's and St Thomas's. Does the Minister agree that this is not good enough?

Edward Argar: Possibly at some risk to my political prospects, I find myself in agreement with the hon. Gentleman on the importance of good and effective leadership. Of course I join him in his remarks about Ukraine.

I highlight that 84% of our NHS workforce are either clinically trained or are directly providing clinical support to clinicians, but it is also important that we recognise the importance and value of the administrators and managers who support the team. That is why we need the best people in those roles, and it is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has commissioned the review led by two extremely eminent people. We are determined to continue driving up the quality and standards of management in the NHS.

Locum Doctors and Nurses

7. Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): If he will make an estimate of the percentage of (a) doctors and (b) nurses being paid locum rates in the latest week for which figures are available. [905779]

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): In NHS hospital trusts to date in 2021-22, there have been on average 14,826 full-time-equivalent agency nurses and 4,621 medical and dental FTE agency staff. It is hard to draw direct percentage comparisons given different methodologies for measuring such percentages, but my understanding is that overall about 3% of nursing shifts and about 1.5% of doctors' shifts in hospitals are filled by locums or agency staff.

Esther McVey: Can we get greater clarity on that information and have it held centrally, given that wages are such a large proportion of the NHS budget? It is essential to know how many hours are paid at the higher locum rate to ensure value for money for the extra billions of pounds that the Government are putting into the NHS to get waiting lists down and for social care.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who is tireless in her determination to ensure value for money for her and all of our taxpayers' pounds, particularly in this space. We continue to work hard to drive down agency and locum spend, focusing instead on both bank staff and our full-time recruitment, on which the Secretary of State has set out the success that we have been having. Since 2015, we have controlled agency spend through price caps and procurement frameworks. However, she is absolutely right, and we want to see more full-time NHS employed staff working at NHS rates in our trusts.

Health Outcomes: Public-Private Partnerships

9. Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): Whether his Department is taking steps to help improve health outcomes through the implementation of public-private partnerships. [905781]

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): Throughout the pandemic, partnerships between the public and private sectors have been vital in securing the resources to protect public health. As one element of that partnership, independent sector providers, for example, delivered almost 7 million episodes of care for NHS patients between April 2020 and December 2021 according to hospital episode statistics data. We continue to support the partnership approach more broadly as part of our plans both to tackle the backlog of elective care and to improve broader health outcomes.

Peter Dowd: I thank the Minister for that response. As he is aware, the national diet and nutrition survey has shown that average intakes of dietary fibre in the United Kingdom are well below recommended levels and less than a quarter of those of countries such as Denmark, where the Government work across industry on a public-private partnership basis to boost wholegrain intakes. What consideration has the Minister given to implementing such an initiative in the United Kingdom to provide a much-needed boost in fibre intakes among the public?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman makes a typically sensible and reasonable point. Government advice on a healthy balanced diet is encapsulated in the UK's national food model, the "Eatwell Guide". It includes advice on incorporating fibre into the diet through fruit and vegetables, bread, rice and pasta. We set nutritional standards for catering in all Government Departments and related organisations to improve the nutritional content of food served, including increasing fibre. I agree that it would be helpful to increase intakes of fibre in our diet, guided appropriately by clinical and medical advice, and a key element of achieving that is working with industry.

Motor Neurone Disease Research

10. **Mr Steve Baker** (Wycombe) (Con): What his timescale is for awarding the £50 million funding for targeted motor neurone disease research through specific scientific programmes proposed by MND charities. [905782]

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): Researchers can apply right now to the National Institute for Health Research and UK Research and Innovation to access the £50 million of funding. The timescale for spending the money depends on the research applications received. The £50 million over five years is a minimum commitment, and we hope to spend much more than that on research in this vital area. We are working with the motor neurone community to help it effectively access the committed funding and to boost MND research even further.

Mr Baker: The Minister has made a positive announcement in the course of the last few months, and this is an important repetition, but there seems to be a slight miscommunication going on because organisations are telling me that they are not sure where the co-ordination is coming from. May I invite her to meet me and the coalition of patients and researchers to try to nail down exactly what is happening, in a spirit of good faith?

Gillian Keegan: I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend. I have also met some of the campaigners and researchers in this area, and the head of our research arm, so that we are clear. The support we are providing to the community includes a new £4 million MND partnership. That will bring the research community together so that they can pool resources and expertise to leverage that funding further, and ensure that they put forward strategic applications.

Children with Epilepsy: Treatments

11. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): If his Department will make an assessment of the long-term impacts of use of (a) benzodiazepines and (b) other opioids on children being treated for acute forms of epilepsy. [905783]

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): Benzodiazepines are an important medicine in the treatment of severe cases of certain types of epileptic conditions in children. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency continues to monitor the safety of treatment with benzodiazepines. Opioids are not authorised to treat children for acute forms of epilepsy.

Christine Jardine: Benzodiazepines are not appropriate for all children, and the Secretary of State has been instrumental in approving medicinal cannabis for use by children with epilepsy. I recently visited a medicinal cannabis farm in the borders of Scotland, which is poised to make an important contribution to the pharmaceutical industry in this country. Given the economic benefits, and the moral imperative of helping those children who can only benefit from medicinal cannabis, will the Minister say what steps the Government will take to make it available on NHS prescriptions?

Gillian Keegan: The National Institute for Health Research welcomes funding applications for research into any aspect of human health, including epilepsy, and we would welcome those pharmaceutical companies coming forward to partake in trials. The NIHR and the NHS will support a programme of two randomised control trials into epilepsy, which will compare medicines containing cannabidiol, and CBD plus tetrahydrocannabinol and a placebo. This is a pioneering area of research, and I am aware that NHS England and NIHR are working closely to get those trials started as soon as possible.

Regional Health Inequalities

12. **Karl Turner** (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to tackle regional health inequalities including waiting times for NHS treatment. [905784]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): We are determined to address the many health disparities that exist across England, particularly in areas such as maternity. Last week I was pleased to announce the maternity disparities taskforce. It aims to tackle the difference in outcomes for pregnant women based on their race and background, which we want to end.

Karl Turner: The problem is that the Government talk a good scrap, but their record on health inequalities is utterly deplorable. Before the pandemic, 4.5 million people were waiting for treatment on NHS lists, and 5,000 people in Hull were waiting for treatment at Hull Royal Infirmary and Castle Hill. Why is someone who lives in east Hull more than twice as likely to be waiting for more than 12 months on an NHS waiting list?

Maria Caulfield: While I recognise that the waiting times in Hull are some of the highest in the country, I am sure the hon. Gentleman will welcome the investment that the Government are putting into his constituency to change that. The Royal Infirmary and Castle Hill Hospitals have £60 million of funding, and his own hospital recognises that it will provide some of the most modern facilities in the country. That includes £2.8 million for new respiratory wards, £1.6 million for new specialist theatre facilities, and £1.1 million for oxygen resilience wards, ensuring that his local hospital is able to tackle some of those health disparities.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): In addition to regional disparities, will the Minister look into disparities between men and women's health? Men die four years earlier than women on average, 75% of suicides are by men, and during the time taken for oral questions, one man will die from prostate cancer. Through my work as chair of the all-party group on issues affecting men and boys, we have taken evidence that points to the need for a men's health strategy. The Government have done much over the years to reduce the gender pay gap. Will the Minister help me to reduce the gender age gap?

Maria Caulfield: I absolutely take the point that my hon. Friend makes around the disparity in life expectancy between those in the most and the least deprived areas, which is greater for men. We will be publishing the health disparities White Paper, and we will focus on any disparities, including those that affect men.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Minister's answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) was quite frankly unbelievable. The fact is that waiting lists are projected to continue increasing year on year. NHS data shows huge regional inequalities in waiting times. Across the river, at Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust, over 70% of patients are being seen within 18 weeks, but in University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust just 38% of patients are being seen in that time. That is not levelling up, so exactly when do the Government plan on getting a grip on those health inequalities?

Maria Caulfield: I am disappointed that the hon. Gentleman is not happy with the investment going into Hull that will try to tackle some of those disparities, because we recognise that there are waiting lists.

Andrew Gwynne: They are going up.

Maria Caulfield: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman realises that there has been a pandemic for two years. The Government have committed funding for elective recovery. We are investing in those areas that are in greatest need in the country, including Hull. I am sure that the residents of Hull welcome the investment that the Government are making in their hospital.

New Health Centre: Maghull

13. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What plans he has for capital investment in a new health centre at Maghull in Sefton Central constituency. [905785]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Following the recent spending review, the next round of projects, including those from Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust, are being considered, and local health systems should receive confirmation of their funding envelope for 2022-23 shortly.

Bill Esterson: In November 2018, the then Health Minister, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), told me that building a new health centre in Maghull was a priority for NHS England, but the estates and technology transformation fund has closed and the funding for Maghull has not been approved by the Government. Can the Minister confirm that the Government still agree that a new health centre, as opposed to what she mentioned before, which is a mental health facility, is needed in Maghull? Can she also tell me what the funding arrangements are in the absence of the estates and technology transformation fund?

Maria Caulfield: I take the hon. Gentleman's point, and of course he will lobby for more investment in his constituency. As I said, the funding envelope will be announced shortly, and it will be for his local area to decide how it spends that.

Waiting List Times: Non-consultant Led Services

15. **Sarah Champion** (Rotherham) (Lab): If he will make an assessment of the potential merits of requiring mandatory reporting of waiting list times for non-consultant led services in NHS mental health trusts. [905788]

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): NHS England and NHS Improvement have been field testing waiting time standards across 35 different local pilot initiatives. Through that clinically led review, we hope to understand the merits of introducing them. NHS England and NHS Improvement published the outcome of a consultation on those standards on 22 February, just over a week ago. We will work with them now on the next steps for the proposed measures.

Sarah Champion: I am very interested in what the Minister says, and I would be really interested to see the review, but in Rotherham the waiting time for children's neurodevelopmental assessments is 200 weeks. That is almost four years of a young life. Consultant led NHS services are required to report waiting times against the 18 and 52 week standard, but neurodevelopmental assessments having no such requirements means that the political will is not there to challenge. Will the Minister please look into putting the resources necessary into children's mental health so that no child, wherever they are, goes without that support?

Gillian Keegan: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She raises an incredibly important point. As a Government, we are determined to tackle long autism diagnosis waiting times. We are investing £2.5 million as part of the NHS long-term plan to test and implement the most effective ways to reduce autism diagnosis waiting times for children and young people across England. That is vital, because we know that the earlier children get the support, the better the outcomes are for them. We are absolutely determined to work on this, but the diagnosis pathways are sometimes quite complex.

Early Medical Abortion: Telemedicine Service

16. **Caroline Nokes** (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): What plans his Department has to take steps to permanently implement the telemedicine service for early medical abortion. [905790]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): The Government will end the temporary approval put in place at the beginning of the pandemic. We have extended the temporary approval for six months until midnight on 29 August 2022. From that point, abortion services for early medical abortion will return in line with pre-covid regulatory requirements. As with any healthcare service, this measure will be kept under review.

Caroline Nokes: Can my hon. Friend explain how the decision to end telemedicine for early medical abortion supports women who responded to the Department's own consultation, how it works in line with the Royal College of General Practice, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, and the Royal College of Midwives, and what the dangers are in ignoring their advice when pulling together a women's health strategy?

Maggie Throup: The temporary approval was put in place during the pandemic to address a specific and acute medical need to reduce the risk of transmission of covid-19. It was recognised that without it, significant numbers of women would not have been able to safely access abortion services. Thanks to the success and

impact of the national vaccination programme, the situation is now very different. In making this decision, the Secretary of State has considered all the risks and benefits regarding the temporary approval.

Child Mental Health In-patient Provision: Derbyshire

17. **Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of child mental health in-patient provision in Derbyshire. [905791]

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): We want to ensure that more children and young people can access appropriate support in their community, and that those who require in-patient cases are treated as close to home as possible. The East Midlands Provider Collaborative is responsible for commissioning tasks for tier 4 in-patient children and adolescent mental health services, including for Derbyshire. It has implemented strategies to ensure the most efficient use of in-patient beds, including a review of the types of beds required by east midlands patients.

Mr Perkins: My constituent Stephen Jones wants what the Minister wants, but when his daughter required in-patient child mental health facilities she was forced to go to Stoke to receive them. He had a 70-mile journey every time he wanted to see her, which was obviously very expensive and also just impossible to do. It meant that his daughter's mental health got worse, because she felt that she had been abandoned by her own family, putting the whole family under pressure. In addition, if people do not receive universal credit, they get no support with the financial impact. Will the Minister tell us more about how we can ensure that children's mental health is not exacerbated by the inability to access services locally?

Gillian Keegan: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. Clearly, these are distressing enough times without having that commute and those travel arrangements on top of that, but sometimes the services are highly specialised. We are trying to get the right blend between access to highly specialised in-patient services and making sure that we increase community efforts. We have been working very hard to ensure that there are more community efforts, but we have also invested £10 million more in capital for more beds to make sure people can get treatment closer to home.

Support for Young Carers

18. **Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): What assessment the Government have made of the adequacy of support for young carers. [905793]

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): We have introduced significant changes to support for young carers, with statutory entitlements to young carers' assessments from April 2015. Local authorities are held to account for such assessments and support through the social care inspection framework. Further, as we set out in our adult social care White Paper, we will amend the school census at the earliest opportunity to include young carers, allowing us to establish a wealth of evidence on this cohort.

Fleur Anderson: I welcome more information being found out about young carers, because this is a hidden health crisis. A constituent came to see me. She is a young person now and has been a young carer for many years. The impact on her educational attainment, physical health and mental health has been devastating. There are 800,000 young carers in the UK, with 800 of them in Wandsworth where support services have been slashed. Does the Minister recognise the impact of that unpaid child labour and does she have a plan to tackle it?

Gillian Keegan: Very much so. Young people should be protected from inappropriate and excessive caring responsibility, and adult and children's services need to work together better. We recognise, though, the lack of hard data and evidence on outcomes for young carers. That is where we are and that is why we have made the commitment, with the Department for Education, to amend the school census. We intend to introduce that as early as 2022-23 and each year thereafter. The data will be collected at primary school and secondary school, so we will be able to look at all kinds of outcomes for this particular cohort and take actions.

Kettering General Hospital

19. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): If he will ensure that the NHS new hospital programme team complete approval processes by summer 2022 to allow the preparation of the full business case for the redevelopment of Kettering General Hospital by the local NHS trust. [905794]

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): The joint DHSC and NHSE/I—NHS England and NHS Improvement—programme team is working closely with all schemes in the programme, including Kettering, on how and when new hospitals will be built across the decade. That is to maximise the potential benefits that the programme's approach can bring for all the new hospitals. We will continue to support all trusts in the programme, including Kettering, to ensure that there is the swift approval of all business cases—including, in this case, for early enabling works—but that will always be in line with due process to ensure that there is value for money, as my hon. Friend would expect.

Mr Hollobone: I thank the hospitals Minister very much for his visit to Kettering General Hospital on 17 February. Specifically, can we have feedback from the new hospital team on the strategic outline case for the hospital by the end of April, so that the hospital can submit its outline business case for the next stage in July?

Edward Argar: It was a pleasure to visit my hon. Friend's constituency. He is a forceful advocate for that constituency and for his hospital, as indeed—if I may slightly crave your indulgence, Mr Speaker—was the late Sir David Amess. Today is the day that Southend-on-Sea officially becomes a city, so I just wanted to shoehorn that into the record. On my hon. Friend's point, we will do everything we can to expedite the approval of business cases while ensuring that due process is followed to make sure that there is value for money.

NHS Dentistry

20. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase provision of NHS dentistry. [905795]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): There are three ways in which we are increasing dental provision. First, we are increasing dental activity levels to 85%, as infection controls now allow us to. The second way is through the £50 million access fund, which will increase appointments by 350,000, and we encourage local commissioners to apply for that funding. Finally, we are reforming the contract, which, for too long, has resulted in a perverse disincentive for dentists.

Mrs Murray: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, but my constituents are telling me that there are no places available with NHS dentists in my constituency. Will the Government now make that a priority following the covid pandemic?

Maria Caulfield: I thank my hon. Friend for all her hard work on campaigning for more dental appointments for her constituents. I believe that she met the Secretary of State last night to push him further on this. Her local area has an allocation of £4.7 million from the £50 million fund, and I encourage her to speak to her local commissioners to make use of that allocation. We are also looking at improving dental training so that we can get more dentists into her area.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Since dentistry was debated just a few weeks ago, another 10,000 of my constituents have received letters to tell them that they will have to go private. They are already waiting for five years to get an appointment. When will they actually get to see a dentist, or are they expected to have poor teeth?

Maria Caulfield: I am not sure where those constituents' letters have come from, but if a contract has been handed back and that is the reason for the letter, the local commissioners should be looking for new providers, so I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady and her commissioners to see what is going on to make that happen.

Topical Questions

T1. [905762] **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): I share the horror and disgust of almost everyone in this House, this country and the whole world at the unprovoked, unjust and unjustifiable invasion of Ukraine by President Putin last week. That appalling act has created a humanitarian emergency and we are looking at every opportunity to give the people of Ukraine the support that they so urgently need.

On Sunday night we sent almost 50,000 items of medical supplies to Poland via air for onward transport to Ukraine. I can inform the House that another plane departed at 7 o'clock this morning with more supplies, including medical equipment and personal protective equipment. We have all been in awe of the bravery and

heroism shown by the Ukrainian people. Rest assured, we all stand with them shoulder to shoulder in their hour of need.

Jason McCartney: On behalf of my constituents with blood cancer, will the Secretary of State please consider providing free asymptomatic testing for the close contacts of immunocompromised people?

Sajid Javid: We will keep under review the testing offer that we will provide over the coming weeks and months. We continue to consider whether any changes are necessary, but as we learn to live with covid we will target our free asymptomatic testing offer on vulnerable people. That includes, of course, those who are immunocompromised. Such individuals will also be eligible for antiviral treatments through a free priority PCR test service.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I associate myself and everyone on the Opposition Benches with the Secretary of State's remarks and warmly welcome the support that the Government are providing to the people of Ukraine and the Ukrainian army. We all stand with the people of Ukraine in their fight for freedom and democracy.

Turning to matters closer to home, the Secretary of State asked the Chancellor for £5 billion to cover essential covid costs—ongoing covid costs—and he came away with nothing, so where will the cuts now fall in the NHS budget?

Sajid Javid: We must all learn to live with covid. The Government have been very clear about that, and we set out a very detailed plan. As infections fall, cases fall and rates of hospitalisation for covid fall, which means we can now have this type of plan. It is a properly funded plan that focuses on vaccines, treatments and targeted testing, and that builds in resilience should there be future variants of concern. It is right that this plan is funded by the Department because it is our No. 1 health priority.

Wes Streeting: Hang on a minute. So one minute the Secretary of State is asking for £5 billion from the Treasury, and the next minute he has found the money within the Department. Either he was trying to pull a fast one on the Treasury, because he had the money he needed, or he has not got the money he wanted and therefore the cuts are going to fall within existing budgets. Members do not need to take my word for it; it was reported in *The Times* that the Health Secretary threatened that, if he did not get the funding, it would mean delaying investment in social care, fewer elective surgeries and cuts to the hospital building programme. Having, I think, not tried to pull a fast one on the Chancellor, is he now pulling a fast one on patients, and is it not really the patients who are going to pay the price for his failed negotiations?

Sajid Javid: First, the hon. Gentleman should not believe everything he reads in the press. We would think he knew that by now. As I said, when it comes to funding our plan for living with covid, it is right that it continues to be the No. 1 priority of my Department to keep this virus at bay and that it is funded by the Department. When it comes to funding, this is the hon. Gentleman who, with all his colleagues, voted against extra funding when he was given the opportunity.

T5. [905767] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): I welcome the record funding that is going into our NHS and also the plans to catch up with appointments and treatments that were delayed because of the covid-19 pandemic. Can my right hon. Friend say a little bit more about how he will increase the number of face-to-face GP appointments available to my Crawley constituents and, indeed, people across the country?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this. NHS England has already given clear guidance to all GP practices that they must provide face-to-face appointments alongside remote consultations. Patients' input into the type of consultation they want should be sought by all practices and their preferences should be respected.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): The Scottish Government have now confirmed their initial aid for humanitarian support to Ukraine of £4 million, as well as medical supplies. They are keen to work with aid agencies and other UK nations to get support to where it is most needed as soon as possible. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with his Cabinet colleagues on boosting urgent medical equipment provision to Ukraine from the UK and on guaranteeing access for doctors to the country?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point, and he will be pleased to know that the UK was one of the first countries in the world to provide medical aid. As I mentioned a moment ago, one flight left on Sunday night and one left this morning, and there will be many more, I hope. I welcome the work of the Scottish Government and their offer, and we will certainly work together in making sure that aid reaches the people who need it.

T6. [905768] **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): Devon's community hospitals and minor injury units, such as the Tyrrell in Ilfracombe, have been unable to open fully for some time. Would my hon. Friend consider extra help where it is needed to enable them to reopen, because although adding extra capacity is welcome, using what we have effectively is surely essential?

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. The minor injuries units at Ilfracombe and Bideford have been temporarily closed since March 2020 due to the pandemic, to allow skilled staff to be redeployed to the emergency department at North Devon District Hospital to meet clinical needs. The Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust continues to work with the local CCG to ensure planning for safe staffing levels for the temporary reconfiguration and for permanent solutions. Were anything to be made permanent, it would of course have to go through the local authority health overview and scrutiny committee. No such referral has been made, and this remains temporary.

T2. [905763] **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): Happy St David's day, Mr Speaker. Physician associates in my constituency, who play a vital role in the NHS, want to hear from the Government when long-awaited regulations that will allow them to take on more responsibility and

play an even greater role in our NHS will come forward. Can the Secretary of State update the House and will he meet me and constituents to discuss this?

Sajid Javid: First, I wish a happy St David's day to the hon. Member and all those celebrating. I would be happy to meet her on this issue. The Government greatly value the role of physician associates. She knows that they bring new talent to the NHS and act in an enabling role, where they can help healthcare teams with their workload. Physician associates will be regulated by the General Medical Council, and the Department has consulted on draft legislation on just how to do that.¹

T7. [905769] **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): I recently met Specsavers to discuss how patient choice should be promoted by making all routine community services patient self-referrals, especially when that can free up GPs' time by not using them as administrative gatekeepers. Will the Secretary of State commit to meeting me to discuss how we can increase GP capacity using such measures?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I am very interested in hearing proposals on patient self-referral. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend. From a cancer perspective, we are also potentially looking at self-referrals for skin diagnosis for possible skin cancer and for breast lumps, because we want to reduce waiting times and increase GP capacity.

T3. [905764] **Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab): Dydd Gŵyl Dewi hapus to you, Mr Speaker, and the whole House. The Minister should be aware of my long-fought campaign to improve how IVF add-ons are marketed to people who are longing for a baby. These add-ons, such as embryo glue or assisted hatching, often have limited success rates and cost thousands of pounds on top of an already expensive procedure. The system simply needs more regulation, so will she commit to meeting me to discuss this important issue further?

Maria Caulfield: I am happy to meet the hon. Lady. She raises a very important point that affects people who are desperate to try for children.

T8. [905770] **Laura Trott** (Sevenoaks) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for the extremely welcome news that he will introduce a licensing regime for non-surgical cosmetic interventions. This is a huge step forward for women's health, and one that I have campaigned for over many years, along with many across the House. I am absolutely delighted. Can he inform us how the proposed licensing regime will keep pace with the rapidly changing landscape of these treatments?

Sajid Javid: First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) for all the work they have done on this most important of issues. Over the past few months, we have all heard in this House some horrific examples of botched, non-cosmetic procedures scarring people for life. No longer will that be allowed. We will be introducing a licensing regime for such procedures. The details of the regime will be set

1. [Official Report, 3 March 2022, Vol. 709, c. 8MC.]

out in regulations, meaning that it will be flexible, agile and change in response to changes in the cosmetics industry.

T4. [905766] **Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): The response from the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) on health inequalities gives me no confidence that the Government have a plan to address these inequalities at all. She says that we have had a pandemic—of course we have, but the point is that it has happened everywhere. What does it say about this Government's priorities that waiting times are escalating to a far greater extent in more deprived communities than they are in the more affluent communities that the Tories are so happy to represent?

Maria Caulfield: I can only reiterate that we have a laser focus on this issue, and that is why we will be bringing forward the health disparities White Paper. I also point the hon. Gentleman to the NHS's approach of the Core20PLUS5, where it is targeting the most deprived 20% of the population in five clinical priority areas: maternity, severe mental illness, chronic respiratory disease, early cancer diagnosis and hypertension. We will deliver on resolving disparities issues.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): Today is the first day of Brain Tumour Awareness Month. The Secretary of State kindly wrote to me in January when my mother died from a brain tumour, and Baroness Tessa Jowell, who was much loved on all sides of the House, also died from a brain tumour. Given that it is the biggest cause of cancer death for the under-40s, and we still do not really know what causes them, does he agree that this should be a priority for research, so that we understand as much about brain tumours as about other cancers?

Sajid Javid: I once again express my condolences to my right hon. Friend for his loss. He is absolutely right to raise this issue and the need for more research. That is one of the reasons why, back in 2018, we announced £40 million of extra research funding over the next five years. I can tell him that some £9 million of that has already been committed to 10 projects. In addition, the Tessa Jowell Brain Matrix is an exciting new trials platform that will give people with brain cancer access to trials of treatments that are best suited for their individual tumours.

T9. [905771] **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): According to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, less than 3% of medical research funding in the UK is focused on women-specific diseases such as endometriosis and polycystic ovary syndrome. They are serious conditions, but too little is known about them and we do not hear enough about them, especially polycystic ovary syndrome. The failure to increase research funding is holding back women's outcomes and experiences. What are the UK Government doing to increase the priority given to research funding for both those conditions?

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Lady raises an important point. She is right that women are under-represented in clinical research and are waiting far too long for diagnoses

of conditions such as endometriosis. The women's health strategy will be published very shortly and I think that she will be pleased with some of its recommendations to drive improvements forward.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for Health for giving his time over recent months to hear the case for an exciting and innovative new health centre for the village of Long Crendon in my constituency, as proposed by the parish council and action group. Will he update the House on where we are with finding funding to help the construction of the project?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is, as ever, persistent and tenacious in his advocacy of Long Crendon's surgery plans; not only at the Dispatch Box but whenever he runs into me around this place, it is often the first thing on his lips. I will continue to work with him on the surgery bid and I encourage him to continue to work with his local NHS systems.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State meet me as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on sexual and reproductive health in the UK? Can I bring along the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the Royal College of Midwives, the Royal College of General Practitioners, the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare to explain why the decision to remove telemedicine is wrong for women in this country?

Sajid Javid: Yes.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): A dental practice in Shepshed has informed me that its NHS contract has changed little since 2006. Can the contracts and value of units of dental activity for treatment be increased to focus on prevention, rather than treatment alone?

Maria Caulfield: I absolutely agree; my hon. Friend hits the nail on the head of why we are seeing such problems in dentistry. We have started negotiations on the dental contract and are working with the British Dental Association. The UDA has to be reformed as part of that: it is a perverse disincentive that turns dentists away from providing NHS services. I will keep her updated on our progress.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank all the Ministers for their responses. What steps have been taken to work with the Education Secretary to provide a higher number of places for medical students containing a golden handshake that allows for no student loan repayment or fees on condition that they stay in the NHS for a set time?

Sajid Javid: It is an important question on the workforce. The hon. Gentleman will know that over the last two years we have removed the cap on medical places and we have the highest number of doctors and dentists in training ever. It is right to think about what more we can do, however, and we are having active discussions with the Secretary of State for Education to see what can be done.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): On the issue of children's mental health, does the Minister agree that children with ADHD and autism have found

the last two years even more stressful than usual? A cross-departmental approach is long overdue to ensure that their needs are adequately met.

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): The hon. Lady is absolutely right, which is why we are working cross-departmentally to bring forward a mental health strategy. It is also why we have put in place mental health recovery funding specifically for the recovery from the pandemic, which has had a terrible effect on children's mental health.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): The Secretary of State is on record saying:

"Making medicinal cannabis available on prescription will benefit the lives of ill patients currently suffering in silence. There is nothing harder than seeing your loved ones in pain".

Since he said that, there have been three prescriptions for medical cannabis on the NHS. They are important, because they set a legal and medical precedent that it can happen, and it can happen now. Currently, however, if I can afford it, I can buy it, but if I cannot, I cannot. When will he address that anomaly?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman will know that for medicines to be generally available on the NHS, they have to be deemed safe and effective by the independent medical regulator. That requires trials to take place and that is where the focus should be. Those who want those medicines to be more easily available should encourage the companies that produce them to have trials and the NHS will support them in doing so.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Chloe Rutherford and Liam Curry from South Shields were tragically murdered in the Manchester Arena terror attack. Their parents' pain is unimaginable and constant. After sitting through hours of the inquiry, they have been told that, in just two days' time, the registration of their precious children's deaths will be done not by them, but by a stranger. Apparently that is standard

practice for mass casualty events. These grieving parents are being denied this final act for their children. Please can the Secretary of State explain why, and urgently intervene?

Sajid Javid: Of course I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady. It is a very important issue that she has raised. I also send my condolences to the parents of Chloe and Liam.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The right decision was taken by this Government last week in confirming that the temporary telemedicine at-home abortion pill should cease. I commend the Government for that decision. Given that more than 10,000 women have ended up in hospital in the year 2020 after taking a first abortion pill, can my hon. Friend confirm that the Government will follow through on that decision?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): As we clearly stated, the decision has been made to end the temporary approval, which means that face-to-face consultations and taking the first pill in a healthcare setting returns to England from 30 August 2022. As I said earlier, all healthcare services are kept under review as evidence and information emerge.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Since the NHS was created, it has been governed by the principle that services are free at the point of use, and, of course, the Secretary of State has a duty to protect that. Many of my constituents want to know whether the Government's decision to start charging for covid tests marks a departure from that founding principle.

Sajid Javid: Clearly, that is one of the most important principles of the NHS and it will not change. It is right, though, that when we look at living with covid, we target testing on those who are most vulnerable or who are in vulnerable settings. That is the right, proportionate and balanced approach.

HMICFRS Recommendations

12.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Rachel Maclean): With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the recommendations of Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire & rescue services.

One in five women experiences sexual assault or attempted assault. The same proportion has been stalked. More than a quarter have endured domestic abuse. Harassment, abuse, rape, female genital mutilation, so-called revenge porn and upskirting happen every day.

Last year, we received more than 180,000 responses to our violence against women and girls call for evidence. The vast majority were from members of the public and many responses made for distressing reading, but their courage in speaking out has shaped our work. It has also laid bare the scale of the problem. Violence against women and girls is endemic. The major change in society that we urgently need demands action from all of us. I am absolutely determined that we will stamp out violence against women and girls, ensure that victims get the support they need, and bring perpetrators to justice.

We set out our plan in our tackling violence against women and girls strategy last July, including committing to a communications campaign, measures to ensure women's safety in public spaces, and strengthening the law—including by criminalising so-called virginity testing and appointing an independent reviewer to help ensure that the regime for managing registered sex offenders is as robust as it can be.

Last year, the Home Secretary also commissioned Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire & rescue services to inspect the police response to violence against women and girls. The inspectorate published its final findings and recommendations in September. It found that progress has been made, but that urgent and significant action was still needed to protect women and girls. Today, I can confirm that we are accepting all the recommendations.

In its first recommendation, the inspectorate called for the response to VAWG offences to be an absolute priority for Government, policing and beyond. We are wholeheartedly committed to that. We took immediate action to strengthen national co-ordination in the police response to these crimes through the appointment of deputy chief constable Maggie Blyth as the full-time national policing lead for VAWG last October.

DCC Blyth has since published a national framework so that police forces have clear and consistent direction. The National Policing Board, which the Home Secretary chairs and which I attend, discussed VAWG last November. The Home Secretary and I underlined the need to act swiftly to protect the public and address confidence in policing. All the board members pledged to support DCC Blyth with her plan to improve policing's response to VAWG-related crimes and hidden harms, and we will return to these discussions later this year.

Continued national grip of these issues is vital. As I said, we will be adding tackling violence against women and girls to the strategic policing requirement. That sends the unequivocal message that these crimes must

be a priority for forces, taken as seriously as homicide, serious and organised crime, and terrorism. For women and girls, this means they can expect their local force to work with others, including collaborating with other agencies, using their local and regional capabilities to tackle violence. We are also strengthening legislation, to make it clear that domestic abuse and sexual offences can be part of the serious violence duty being introduced via the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill.

In its second overarching recommendation, the inspectorate rightly advocated the relentless pursuit and disruption of VAWG perpetrators. That is why we have committed to expanding Operation Soteria, an innovative pilot project to transform approaches to rape cases, including through perpetrator-centric investigations, to a further 14 police force areas. This year, we have also invested £11 million in domestic abuse perpetrator programmes across the country to stamp it out before it escalates, and we are toughening up legislation to clamp down on online abuse such as cyber-stalking and so-called revenge porn.

Victims are right at the heart of everything we do, which is why we fully accept the inspectorate's third overarching recommendation: to ensure tailored and consistent victim support. In the tackling VAWG strategy, we committed to increase funding for specialist services. This support comes from right across Government. In the Home Office alone, we have allocated £43 million to tackling VAWG. Across Government more widely, we are spending £300 million to support victims.

Mr Speaker, you will also be aware of the £5 million safety of women at night fund, as well as the multiple rounds of safer streets funding, amounting to £150 million. These schemes are advocated for and delivered by local authorities, and they are making a real, tangible and practical difference to women in the night-time economy and as they go about their daily lives, going to work, seeing their friends, going shopping, using public transport and being in public spaces. The schemes include things such as patrols, taxi marshals, additional security, training for the night-time economy, and the better lighting of routes between bars and nightclubs. We will also publish a victims' Bill to enshrine in law that the needs of victims are a priority for the criminal justice system.

Individuals and communities need to have full confidence in policing. That requires chief constables to demand consistently high standards in responding to VAWG, as recommended in the inspectorate's fourth overarching recommendation. DCC Blyth is supporting forces in doing that and holding them to account. Dame Elish Angiolini's inquiry will shine a light on the failings that allowed the abuse of position by a then serving police officer and those wider systematic issues within policing. The Home Secretary has also asked the inspectorate to review vetting procedures in policing across England and Wales, including whether forces are equipped to deal with misogynistic and predatory behaviour.

Lastly, as recommended by the inspectorate, we are also committed to exploring the use of police outcome codes, particularly those used to close cases where there are evidential difficulties or victims do not support police action. All cases must be taken seriously by the criminal justice system.

In addition to the inspectorate's recommendations, last night we launched a powerful multi-year national communications campaign, to go live today, called

“Enough”. It is designed to make clear to perpetrators that their crimes will not be tolerated, to drive rejection of those crimes throughout society and to help victims to get all the support they need. I urge all hon. Members of this House, whatever Bench they sit on, to share the campaign, to ensure it reaches as many people as possible. They will find the resources on the Home Office website.

We will soon publish a dedicated domestic abuse plan complementing the VAWG strategy, as well as statutory guidance on the definition of domestic abuse. We will publish a refreshed national statement of expectations to provide guidance to local areas on effective commissioning of support services for victims and survivors. We will also refresh our male victims position statement in recognition of the fact that, of course, men and boys also experience these appalling crimes and need a tailored response.

This Government will never accept that violence, harassment or abuse are an inevitable feature of life. Changing things radically for the better is everyone's business, and I commend this statement to the House.

12.45 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement, a copy of which we received 15 minutes before it was made. You might think, Mr Speaker, that with the machinery of government at their disposal Ministers could follow the normal practice and give the statement to us a little sooner than that, but I thank her for the statement in any case.

Mr Speaker: Order. Have I heard the shadow Minister correctly that she got the statement only 15 minutes beforehand?

Sarah Jones: It was at 12.15 pm, and we thought the statement was starting at 12.30 pm.

Mr Speaker: That is not acceptable. I say to the Minister and to the officials in the box: why has this happened? It totally goes against the rule. Copies of statements should arrive at least 45 minutes before they are made. I cannot understand. If we were told that this statement was due, there must have been enough time to make sure that the Opposition could, quite rightly, hold the Government to account. Back Benchers also need to hold the Government to account, but the statement should be led equally by both sides of the House.

Rachel Maclean: Mr Speaker, may I offer my full and wholehearted apology for the failure to follow those processes? There has been a failure. I apologise to the shadow Minister, I apologise to you, Mr Speaker, and I apologise to the whole House. I will personally take it upon myself at the highest levels of the Department to find out what went wrong in this instance, and I am very happy to answer questions at any time.

Sarah Jones: May I say that that was an exercise in making a very good apology? I appreciate it very much.

On so many measures around violence against women and girls, we are sadly going in the wrong direction. Confidence in the police to tackle violence against women and girls is falling; the rape charge rate is staggeringly low and going backwards, at just 1.3%; the police recorded a total of 845,734 domestic abuse-related

crimes in 2021, and we know that domestic violence skyrocketed during the pandemic, with 260,000 abuse offences between March and June alone. More and more victims are dropping out of the system, unable to cope with the intrusion and the delays.

The damning report of Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire & rescue services into the police response to violence against women and girls should have been a wake-up call. Zoë Billingham told us clearly that we cannot stand aside and let violence against women and girls continue, and it must not be left to women and girls to make that happen.

We welcome the Government's saying today that they will make tackling violence against women and girls a strategic police requirement—but why on earth have they waited until now to do it? They could have done it straight away when the report was published. The scale of the response is still far too small. Nothing the Government are saying does anything for offender management. The Government must set out a plan for how exactly perpetrators will be interrupted.

The inspectorate's report was clear that far more needs to be done to identify and manage high-harm and serial offenders against women and girls. Some of the offenders in cases reviewed by the inspectorate had offended against eight or nine different victims. That is completely unacceptable. Far too many dangerous perpetrators are being allowed to offend again and again; criminals are being let off and the victims are being let down. We welcome the expansion of Operation Soteria, but why not do that for every force—why only 14?

Members across the House will have read about the tragic case of a woman killed by her ex-husband in Maida Vale. She had reported multiple incidents of domestic abuse and a stalking prevention order had been put in place, but the lack of proper perpetrator management meant that she lost her life. At least two fifths of police forces in England and Wales do not have specialist RASSO—rape and serious sexual offences—units, even though specialist support and advice to victims is vital in reducing victim drop-out. The Government are refusing to back Labour's calls to require RASSO units in every police force area. Will the Government now commit to putting a RASSO unit in every police force area, and if not, why not, when we know that they work?

The joint thematic inspection of the police and CPS's response to rape says that the provision of victims services varies wildly throughout police forces and CPS areas. Rape victims should be given a legal advocate who sees the victim through the whole process so that fewer people drop out. What are the Government's plans to ensure that victim support is consistent across the country? Will the Government commit to giving rape victims a legal advocate? The Government should be doing everything at their disposal to raise the priority of the police and CPS's response to violence against women and girls.

The Government have the power to act and make this period one of profound change, and to lead a transformation to make our streets safer for women and girls. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) has repeatedly asked when the Home Secretary will implement the recommendations of Zoë Billingham's report in full, so we welcome the fact that the Government have finally committed to

[Sarah Jones]

accepting the report's recommendations, but why did it need to take this long? Will the Minister commit to coming back to this House to provide a timeline for the report's implementation?

The time for warm words has long passed. Now is the time for Government to work together, across Departments, to tackle this epidemic of violence wherever it arises, be it in the criminal justice system, in schools, in our homes or on our streets.

Rachel Maclean: I welcome the hon. Lady's response to the fact that we have made this momentous change and added the issue of violence against women and girls to the strategic police requirement. I think she has broadly welcomed this very important step. It is vital to point out to the House how significant it is: it is putting crimes of violence against women and girls on a par with terrorism, serious violence and drug offences. That is an enormous change to the policing operation in this country. Members across the House will, I am sure, reflect on the fact that policing in this country is independent from Government, so it is vital that we work across the entire system to make sure that the police have the funding, the resources and the legal powers they need to do their job. This Government have put record funding into the police, supporting them with an uplift programme of £15.9 billion and recruiting additional officers to be able to tackle these crimes wherever they occur. We are absolutely focused on driving out these crimes from our society.

I noticed that the hon. Lady did not refer to the communications campaign that we launched last night. That is a shame. I would be grateful if she could confirm, as I think she is doing, that she will share that widely with all her colleagues. In that room last night, there were charities, campaigners, victims of extremely serious crimes and people who have worked on the frontline, and they told us that they have been calling for exactly such a campaign for decades. Education is vital. We need to make it as unacceptable to be calling out and harassing women and girls on the streets as it is to drive without a seatbelt. Today we are taking the first step to doing that, and I know that everybody in the House will welcome it.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I welcome the seriousness with which the Minister is taking this issue and the fact that the Government are adopting the recommendations of the inspectorate. She will be aware that the Home Affairs Committee is looking into violence against women and girls and the low level of rape case convictions. Two of the key findings that will improve the situation are, first, the quality and appropriateness of the initial police reaction to reports, particularly with certain cohorts of people such as deaf women and those who do not have English as their first language; and secondly, the delay between an initial investigation and its ever coming to court, if it does—so many women drop out of that process because of the continued hassle overhanging them of having to go through the investigation. Does she agree that we absolutely urgently have to get those two things right?

Rachel Maclean: It is a pleasure to respond to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, and of course it was a pleasure to appear before him—[*Interruption.*]

Oh, the interim Chair: my apologies to the Chair, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), who is in her place. That is mortifying; I do apologise. Nevertheless, I look forward to appearing in front of the Committee, no doubt, in future.

The issues that my hon. Friend raised are vital. He is right to point to the challenges faced by women and girls, and of course men, who come from backgrounds of disability or other circumstances that make it harder for them to engage with the criminal justice system. That is exactly why we are expanding our groundbreaking programme, Operation Soteria, which looks in detail at the issues that he highlighted about the delays in rape case prosecutions. These issues are systematic and actually go back decades. This is a very important point. We are now prosecuting rape and these crimes in a very different age—in a digital age. People now have evidence on their phones. They have gigabytes and terabytes of information in the cloud, all of which, at times, needs to be introduced into an investigation. That must be done in a proportionate and sensible way. That is why I think my hon. Friend will welcome the work that we are doing in Operation Soteria to tackle another issue that has often been raised with us by victims—that of people having their phones taken away from them.

Mr Speaker: Order. I understand we are trying to buy time. We do not need to buy time, so let us do our normal routine.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton)—the longest-serving member of the Home Affairs Committee and a very able acting Chair.

I welcome the fact that men's violence against women and girls will be a strategic policing requirement—that is absolutely right. However, the joint thematic report on the police and CPS's response to rape, which was published at the end of last week, had, again, the shocking statistic that for those cases that actually get to court, over 700 days elapse from the report of the incident to actually getting to court. There were nine recommendations in the report, including the establishment of a commissioner for adult rape and serious sexual offences, and having specialist rape courts to deal with the backlog. Will the Minister comment on whether those recommendations will be accepted by the Government? Will she confirm which Home Office Minister is responsible for the implementation of the rape review?

Rachel Maclean: It is a pleasure to respond to the Chair of the Select Committee. The rape review is a cross-Government effort led by the deputy Prime Minister. A number of Ministers are involved in it, most notably myself and the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins). We work together to make sure that our two Departments co-ordinate on these very important issues. We will be coming forward in due course with our response to the report that was published last Friday, and we will be happy to come back to the House or answer questions in the usual way.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I welcome this statement very strongly. May I highlight to my hon. Friend the case of the rape and murder of Libby

Squire? Her parents still live in my constituency; the case of course took place in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson). The case particularly highlights how behaviours can escalate from non-contact sexual offences to, as I say, rape and murder. What will my hon. Friend do to make sure that those patterns of escalation are effectively dealt with so that tragedies like that can be avoided in future?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this atrocious case to the House's attention again and for all his work on behalf of the victim's family. He is right to highlight the trends of escalating offences, which are an integral part of our Operation Soteria work and which we are dealing with through the rape review. The academics reviewing cases in which things have gone wrong, or have not progressed as fast as they should, have come forward with recommendations that are being implemented in forces at pace. We are rolling out the model of best practice in investigations to a further 14 forces and will stand it up nationally to forces across the country, because we need these patterns to be recognised and tackled as soon as they occur.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the positive initiative that she mentions and for the enthusiastic way in which she is addressing the Chamber. The inspectorate's report found that a high number of rape and domestic abuse victims are closing their cases and dropping out of the process; in fact, more than 40% of rape victims dropped out of the process last year. It is clear that more specialist support is needed, so today will the Government back Labour's plan to increase the number of RASSO units?

Rachel Maclean: I want to be clear that we completely support the need for specialist RASSO training in all police forces. We are working with our partners in policing through the National Policing Board, through all the work taking place in the rape review and through the additional funding resource that we have put into the police to enable them to train officers to investigate and tackle these crimes. Labour is right to say that this is a specialist area; we need to get it right, so we agree that forces need that specialism.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I agree with many things that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), said, especially her comment that we cannot just leave it up to women and girls to resolve the violence against them, but it was rather ironic that she made that comment to a Chamber in which there were about 15 male Conservative MPs and not a single male Labour MP behind her, which was disappointing.

I congratulate the Minister on accepting all the recommendations in the report, which builds on the good work already done on FGM and particularly on spiking; last night's announcement was very important to me and to many in this House. At last night's event, Deputy Chief Constable Blyth and others, including Nick Gazzard of the Hollie Gazzard Trust in Gloucester, brought together people who really care about the issue. Does the Minister agree that we must keep it high up the agenda?

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend has been a consistent champion who has worked tirelessly to bring the House's attention to crimes such as spiking. Because of his consistent advocacy, we will be making enormous strides in the area.

I am absolutely delighted to see so many male colleagues behind me. We are united in tackling this.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): Without knowing the full scale of violence against women and girls, we cannot hold all perpetrators to account, and victims continue to see justice denied. Hundreds of suicides and deaths a year could be linked to abuse at home.

#NotJustAnother is a campaign initiated by Professor Jane Monckton Smith and supported by Advocacy After Fatal Domestic Abuse, with which I happened to be on the phone just before I ran into the Chamber for this statement, and by many organisations and experts. It calls on the police to count all women who have died in suspicious circumstances following abuse. That is counting the real cost of male violence. Will the Government pledge to do it?

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Lady for attending the event last night. It was a real pleasure to see her there and speak to many of the organisations with which she has been working on these vital issues. We are looking at domestic homicides and suicide after domestic abuse; I am very happy to meet her and update her in more detail on the work we are doing.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): I spent much of the morning talking online with Loughborough College uniformed services students about prisons and reducing reoffending, so this is a well-timed and welcome statement. I really welcome today's announcement.

Will my hon. Friend confirm that, following the recommendations, her Department will improve collaboration between police and prosecutors to improve rape prosecution rates? What steps will be taken to identify and monitor that action and report back to the House?

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend is totally right: improving how the police, the CPS and all parts of the system work together is vital to improving victims' experiences and bringing more rapists to justice. Other measures that we have introduced, such as those in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, will bring in stronger sentences to act as a deterrent. I am always happy to update the House on the groundbreaking work of Operation Soteria, which is led by the Deputy Prime Minister.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I welcome the Government's intention to take violence against women and girls seriously at last. I put on record my disappointment that yesterday the Government did not agree to the Lords amendment to make misogyny a hate crime, but there we go.

Further to the question asked by the hon. Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), will the Minister support my private Member's Bill coming before Parliament next week? My Bill would establish an independent review of rape conviction rates and the effect on victims of rape, and it would make sure that the Government act on the review's requirements.

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Lady will be aware that we already have independent mechanisms in place to review exactly those issues. That is the work of the rape review and of the many inspectorate bodies that many hon. Members have referred to, such as HMICFRS and HM Crown Prosecution Service inspectorate. I am not sure whether she attended the launch last night, but I urge her to look at the innovative, fantastic and well-received national communications campaign, which directly addresses misogyny in society. That is how we drive misogyny out of our society: by stopping men and boys from acting in a misogynistic way.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I welcome the Government's position and their adoption of the recommendations. I apologise for not attending the event last night; I wanted to, but my diary did not allow it.

I particularly welcome the tailored and consistent victim support that the Minister mentioned. I commend the work of Alison Hernandez, our police and crime commissioner in Devon and Cornwall. May I draw the Minister's attention to the extra challenges that rural and coastal communities face? If we are to get a genuine tailored commitment to get victims from the offence to a successful prosecution, it will take feet on the ground and extra resource. Will she expand on what the Government expect to present in that space?

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the need for specialist support, which is why we have put additional resources into the system. We have expanded the essential independent sexual violence adviser and independent domestic violence adviser scheme, in which individuals are trained to work with victims in a very specialised way and help them to navigate their way through the system. We recognise that it is daunting, but we know that putting those people in place can make an enormous difference to the conviction rate.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): The Minister asks us to support the new communications plan, as I am sure everybody in the House will. She said in her statement that the "Enough" campaign

"is designed to make it clear to perpetrators that their crimes will not be tolerated",

but it is hard to see how the communications plan is being matched with action. More than 98% of reported rape cases go unprosecuted. When can we expect prosecution rates to increase under the new plans? Is it months, is it years or is it decades?

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Lady will recognise that this is a systemic change—an enormous cultural change that will not happen overnight. In fact, the issues go back decades under multiple Governments. Women and girls and rape victims have been let down. That is why this Government have taken the bull by the horns: we are the Government who set up the rape review to work extensively with the CPS and the police to find out what is going wrong and fix it with cash, legislation and action.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I very much welcome my hon. Friend's statement. The hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) asked about the communications campaign. I believe that the campaign is important, but the long-term societal shift must start from a very early age. What is the Minister doing in schools to ensure that young people understand this important issue and come out of school well educated and fully aware of the issues?

Rachel Maclean: As I say, it is fantastic to see so many male colleagues behind me. We are united, and we understand that the issues start in schools. Conservative Members have consistently advocated for education in primary and secondary schools on healthy relationships and consent for sexual acts. We know that young people are exposed to the internet these days, and to so many other influences; we stand by them as we help them to grow up in a healthy way.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): In its second recommendation, the inspectorate rightly advocated "the relentless pursuit and disruption of perpetrators"

of violence against women and girls. The Minister may be aware that one area about which I have grave concern is the number of girls and young women who are coerced by gang members. Those women sometimes do not come forward; they do not have voices to report the sheer level of violence that they suffer. The Minister's predecessor, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), made a commitment that the violence against women and girls strategy would involve looking at data on the gender-specific abuse that these women face throughout the country. Will the Minister commit herself to reviewing that, please?

Rachel Maclean: Of course we are aware of the tragic involvement of girls, and boys, in county lines. Our response to county lines has been strengthened considerably, which has resulted in a huge number of arrests and the taking out of criminal gangs. Our response is very sensitive to the fact that these are hidden harms. We do record the data on the victims, and that informs our response to enable us to put more of these horrific perpetrators behind bars.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her statement, and for the positive action that she and the Government are taking. In respect of the safeguarding of ladies and girls, as well as gentlemen and boys, has the Minister had an opportunity to discuss this positive statement with the devolved Administrations—for instance, the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the relevant Minister in particular—to ensure that back home we can follow the rules that have been set here for the benefit of everyone in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? We can all gain from what has been put forward here today.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his advocacy of this issue. We work very closely with all the devolved Administrations, and I will be happy to set up further conversations in which he can be involved.

Ukraine

1.11 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement updating the House on the Government's humanitarian response to the terrible, unjust war that Putin is waging in Ukraine. We are united across the House in horror at what is happening, and the whole country stands with the heroic people of Ukraine. I have come straight from a meeting with our dear friend and colleague the Ukrainian ambassador to London, and I have just heard at first hand about some of the pressures and tensions inside the country.

Putin must fail in his assault on Ukraine. Working closely with the Ukrainian Government and allies in the neighbouring region, the United Kingdom is standing shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine, sending military support and defensive military aid and training thousands of Ukrainian troops, as well as introducing one of the toughest sanctions regimes in the world. We are supporting NATO partners, pressing for more economic reform and energy independence in Ukraine, banning Aeroflot, and calling for an end to Russian involvement in the SWIFT banking system.

We will continue to think robustly and creatively about what more we can all do. As I said in the House yesterday, the Government will table amendments to the visa penalty measures in the Nationality and Borders Bill, so that we can slow down and, effectively, stop the processing of Russian visas or those of any state that poses a threat to our national security or the interests of our allies across the world. The Government of Ukraine have requested that the Russian Government be suspended from Interpol. The UK wholeheartedly endorses that position, and we are rallying other international partners to call for and support it as well.

Yesterday I announced the first phase of a bespoke humanitarian support package for the people of Ukraine, having listened carefully to the requests from the Ukrainian Government. We have already made significant and unprecedented changes to the immigration system. We have helped hundreds of British nationals and their family members resident in Ukraine to leave the country, with Home Office staff working around the clock to assist them. The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) raised a specific case yesterday, and I am pleased to confirm that the person concerned has been able to travel to the UK.

Family members of British nationals resident in Ukraine who need a UK visa can apply through the temporary location in Lviv, or through visa application centres in Poland, Moldova, Romania and Hungary. We have created additional capacity in all locations apace, in anticipation of the invasion of Ukraine. That includes a new pop-up visa application centre in Rzeszow, Poland, whose total capacity is currently well over 3,000 appointments per week. Our contingency plans have been enacted and are expected to increase total capacity further to 6,000 appointments a week, starting this week. By contrast, demand across these locations is usually approximately 890 biometric appointments per week. There remains availability of appointments and walk-ins across all locations. Should more capacity be required, we will of course deliver it. Our rapid deployment

teams are already in the region; the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office sent them in a few weeks ago to support this whole effort.

I have also removed the usual language requirements and salary thresholds for people to come to the UK and be with their families. When family members of British nationals do not meet the usual eligibility criteria but do pass all security checks, we will give them permission to enter the UK outside the usual rules for 12 months. This means that British nationals, and any person settled in the UK, can bring over immediate Ukrainian family members. Through that policy alone, an additional 100,000 Ukrainians could be eligible to come to the UK and gain access to work and public services. There is no limit on the numbers eligible under this route. Anyone in Ukraine intending to apply under the family migration route should call the dedicated 24-hour Home Office line for assistance before applying. Ukrainian nationals already in the UK have been given the option to switch, free of charge, to a points-based immigration route or a family visa route. Visas for Ukrainian temporary workers in some sectors are being extended, so they can now stay until at least 31 December this year.

As I said yesterday, I have heard some Members call for visa waivers. Russian troops are seeking to infiltrate and merge with Ukrainian forces. Extremists are on the ground in the region, too. *[Interruption.]* I will continue, and perhaps I will take questions from Opposition Members later. However, I want to emphasise the seriousness of the security situation on the ground. That is not something that can be discounted lightly. I am sure that if the Opposition want a security briefing from our colleagues, we will happily provide one, but I am very sceptical about how they treat and respect security advice.

As I was saying, extremists are on the ground in the region, too. Given that, and also Putin's willingness to do violence on British soil—and in keeping with our approach, which we have retained consistently throughout all emergency evacuations, including that of Afghanistan—we cannot suspend any security or biometric checks on the people whom we welcome to our country. We have a collective duty to keep the British people safe, and this approach is based on the strongest security advice. These measures have been designed to enable swift implementation—that is the point: swift implementation—without the need for legislation or changes to immigration rules. The Ukrainian people need help immediately, and we are putting it in place now.

I can also set out phase 2 of our bespoke humanitarian support package for the people of Ukraine, as outlined by the Prime Minister earlier today. First, we are establishing an expansive Ukrainian family scheme so that British nationals and people settled in the UK can bring a wider group of family members to the UK. We are extending eligibility to parents, grandparents, adult offspring, siblings, and their immediate family members. Again, the scheme will be free. Those joining family members in the UK will be granted leave for an initial period of 12 months. They will be able to work and have access to public funds.

Secondly, we will establish a humanitarian sponsorship pathway, which will open up a route to the UK for Ukrainians who may not have family ties with the UK, but who are able to match with individuals, charities, businesses and community groups. Those who come

[Priti Patel]

under this scheme will also be granted leave for an initial period of 12 months, and will be able to work and have access to public services. The Home Office will work closely with all our international partners on the ground to ensure that displaced Ukrainians in need of a home are supported. My colleague the Secretary of State for Levelling Up will work with the devolved Administrations to ensure that those who want to sponsor an individual or family can volunteer and be matched quickly with Ukrainians in need. There will be no numerical limits on this scheme, and we will welcome as many Ukrainians as wish to come and have match sponsors.

Making a success of the new humanitarian sponsorship pathway will require a national effort from the entire country, and our country will rise to that challenge. This is a generous, expansive and unprecedented package. It will mean that the British public and the Ukrainian diaspora can support displaced Ukrainians in the UK until they are able to return to a free and sovereign Ukraine. We are striking a blow for democracy and freedom against tyranny. Above all, we are doing right by the courageous people of Ukraine. We will help British nationals and their families to get out of Ukraine safely. We will support our displaced Ukrainian friends, and we will respond robustly to Russian threats here in the UK. We will not back down. We will do what is right. I commend this statement to the House.

1.20 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): People's homes in Kharkiv have been shelled, children have been killed and Russian tanks are now rolling in on Kyiv. The Ukrainian people are showing immense courage and resolve in the face of a despot and of unparalleled aggression. We need to do our bit to support them, alongside the sanctions and the equipment assistance, and that means being prepared to do our bit to provide sanctuary. Families are being split up, often with fathers and older children staying to fight while mothers, grandparents and younger children are leaving to find safety and sanctuary. Many of those families want to stay close to home, but for those who want to travel to the UK to seek shelter with family or friends and get the support they need at this dreadful time, we must be ready to help. We must be ready to do our bit, alongside other countries, as we have done in generations past, and to give sanctuary to those fleeing war in Europe.

We have been calling repeatedly on the Government to do more to help, and there will be considerable relief that they have now changed their position and accepted that we must do more. In particular, I am glad that the Government appear to have completely changed their policy in response to our calls to help elderly parents and wider family members. I am glad that they have listened not just to those in this House but to people across the country and, most importantly, to Ukrainians and their families. I have many questions about how this will actually work and how many people in practice it will help. I am concerned about the way in which the Home Office has handled this, but that is an issue for another day.

Starting with the family issues, we are glad to know that Valentyna Klimova in Paris can now join her daughter, having initially been refused. However, she

has had to pay around £700 to apply for visas, having been initially turned down. Can the Home Secretary confirm that that money will be refunded to her and that nobody will have to pay if they are seeking sanctuary from Ukraine? The statement also says that elderly parents, siblings and adult children will now be included in the family visa. Does that include stepchildren? I have been contacted by someone who is desperate to get his stepdaughter and granddaughter into the country. What about a young mum with her children who has left the rest of her family in Ukraine? Can she come and stay with her uncle and aunt? Are uncles and aunts included? Does the sponsoring family member have to be British or have indefinite leave to remain? What about Ukrainians who are here on work visas or study visas, or those who come here as lorry drivers or on visitor visas? Surely the Home Secretary is not going to turn their families away.

When people are fleeing Russian authoritarianism and war, I assume that the Home Secretary will not apply a test based on which bureaucratic box UK residents tick. Can she make a simple commitment now that family members from Ukraine who are fleeing persecution are all welcome here in the UK, and that no matter what visa their family member here in the UK has, we will give them sanctuary?

What about people who have been given the chance to stay with friends? We know that most people want to stay near Ukraine, but what about someone who has left all their family but used to work or study here in Britain? Can they get sanctuary here? Is there a route for them? If the only route is the community route, I am concerned that that will take a long time. Have the Government considered an emergency humanitarian or protection visa that could still include all the significant security and biometric checks the Home Secretary has talked about but that could be done swiftly and go broader than family members?

Can the Home Secretary also tell us about the community sponsorship scheme? This is very welcome and important, but the existing scheme takes a long time. It requires people to meet a whole series of tests in order to be able to sponsor a refugee, and it requires considerable fundraising. I know that many people will want to be involved in it, but I know many who have been deterred in the past by how complex it is. So far, it has helped only around 500 people to resettle over a period of five years. That is around 100 a year. How many people is she expecting to be able to be helped, and what actions will she take to speed up that system and ensure that it gets proper support?

I can see that the scheme is not a resettlement scheme, and it does not appear to have active Government support. Why are there no proposals for a resettlement scheme as part of this statement? Has the Home Secretary looked at that? What plans are there to go further and provide a resettlement scheme in addition to community sponsorship? Finally, I want to ask the Home Secretary about the figures of 100,000 or 200,000 that she has raised. I have not been able to find anybody who can make sense of them or explain the source of those figures, so perhaps she could explain to us how many people in practice she thinks will come and how those figures have been calculated.

It is important that the Government have accepted that we need to do more. We have a huge responsibility to work alongside other European countries to provide

sanctuary to those who are fleeing war in Europe, but we must ensure that that actually happens in practice and that bureaucratic hurdles, delays and obstacles do not get in the way of people across the country showing their support for those who have fled the appalling fighting in Ukraine. We have all made pledges to stand by Ukraine, and we must do that by providing sanctuary now.

Priti Patel: First, it is important to recognise that the British Government are the first Government to outline practical measures on how to bring people to the United Kingdom—[*Interruption.*] It is actually true, in terms of the specific schemes that we have outlined today. [Interruption.] Either Labour Members are interested and want to listen to how—[Interruption.] Perhaps they would rather make cheap political points from the Opposition Benches, but this is a moment when everyone should be coming together in our national interest to provide help and support.

If I may, I shall respond to some of the points that the shadow Home Secretary has made. She asked about stepchildren. This is a Ukrainian family scheme, and I have already outlined some of the categories of family members who will be eligible to come over to the United Kingdom. The scheme will be free. She also mentioned the lady who had paid fees. All fees for schemes will not be put in place, and if a refund needs to be provided, it will be provided.

While I have the floor, it might be worth my outlining some practical measures for all colleagues while responding to the right hon. Lady's questions. Yesterday in the House I said that MPs should not get themselves directly involved in caseworking. As of tomorrow, the Home Office will be providing a team based in Portcullis House, where MPs can directly refer cases—in addition to the helpline—to ensure that applications are fulfilled. This can involve any resident, particularly in Members' own constituencies, where they have Ukrainian nationals or British nationals who are interested in sponsorship or bringing family members over. Within hours we will be able to triage those cases and bring them through our systems to help get people over.

The right hon. Lady made some wider points that I would like to address, and they relate to numbers. We have a very generous offer in terms of the numbers of people that we would like to bring over. As I said earlier and now repeat to the House, we are not setting caps or limits on these numbers. At this stage, we should be very honest and level with everyone that we do not know the number of people who will seek to come to the United Kingdom. Frankly, we are basing this on our conversations with ambassadors representing the region in London. I came to the House straight from a meeting with the Ukrainian ambassador, who is very grateful for the routes and the support we are providing, but the Government do not know the numbers. The Polish, Hungarian and Czech Governments are asking for assistance in country. They want aid and resources right now, and they are saying that they do not know how many people will want to come to the United Kingdom. None the less, that should not deter us from the work we are doing right now.

The other fact to note—the right hon. Lady mentioned this in her remarks, too—is that we are being told clearly that people want to stay in the region. It is a fact

that what is happening in Ukraine right now, with the amazing and heroic resistance being shown, is that people are fighting for the freedom of their country, and family members and loved ones want to stay in the region.

The work of our Government is twofold, to provide humanitarian assistance and support in the region—there is a big need for humanitarian support and aid, and the Government are doing that—while creating routes. My final response to the right hon. Lady is about the sponsorship route, which will be led by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and his Department. There will be further announcements on how it will be stood up, because it is a national effort involving charities, businesses and communities, particularly the diaspora community, who are willing to make this scheme happen. It is right that we work with partners.

Linked to that, the right hon. Lady asked about resettlement. This is a phased approach. We are looking at every single avenue, and our record in government shows that 97,000 British nationals overseas and 18,000 people from Afghanistan have come over. We have created resettlement pathways, so this Government have that capability and we are absolutely ready to stand them up, but we can do that by working with our partners in country and in the region.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): The women and children fleeing Ukraine are seeking refuge from a war in a member state of the Council of Europe, of which we are also a member, so we have a clear duty towards them. I am listening to my right hon. Friend with great interest, and I will study with care her proposals for a humanitarian sponsorship pathway.

In east Kent we have a team of people who are ready, willing and able to take cars and coaches to the Polish border to bring people home to Britain. We have, as my right hon. Friend knows, a processing centre at Manston barracks that is capable of dealing with these people. Can we please do as we did in 1956 and 1968, cut through the red tape and get these people home so that their menfolk, who are fighting and dying on the streets of Kyiv, can at least know that their women and children are safe?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend summarises the situation very clearly and correctly. That is exactly what we are doing, and creating pathways and routes means working with countries in the region. Dialogue with the Polish, Czech and Hungarian Governments is happening right now. We are working with them, through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the rapid deployment teams that are and have been in country, on how we can get people out of the region who want to come to the UK through sponsorship or the other routes we have outlined. Those mechanisms are in place.

It is important to recognise that this comes back to the situation on the ground, not just in Ukraine but in the countries that are receiving refugees right now. It is very difficult, as they have capacity and constraint issues, too. The British Government are working through the FCDO, the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office. All our teams are surging capacity to assist those Governments at this very difficult time.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): To be fair, that is certainly better than what was said yesterday. Yet again, at a time of humanitarian crisis, the Home Office is having to be dragged towards a generous and comprehensive response, instead of a shambolic and miserly mess. For days, the Home Secretary has lagged behind the demands from the public, from Parliament and even from within her own party.

For Ukrainians who are already here, instead of a piecemeal visa extension, can we have a comprehensive extension of all visas for at least a year? The Home Secretary referred to switching to a points-based system, but not everyone will qualify. What are they supposed to do?

On Ukrainians who are seeking safety here, yesterday I raised the case of my constituent who fled to Romania with his Ukrainian family. His wife and child will be fine, but his 59-year-old mother-in-law and his six-year-old niece were not helped by yesterday's announcement, and it is still not clear whether they are helped by today's announcement. Will they be helped? Theirs is a very typical case that Members on both sides of the House will have to deal with.

The simple and just response is to waive visa requirements for Ukrainians and to offer comprehensive protection. That is the only way to stop splitting up families, and the only way to help Ukrainians, as a whole, avoid the red tape about which we have already heard today. If our European allies can do it, so can we.

The Home Secretary's letter to MPs this morning said that those who do not fit the family criteria can apply ordinarily under the points-based immigration system. That is just about as helpful as the infamous suggestion that they use the agricultural workers scheme.

The humanitarian sponsorship pathway announced today could be a welcome addition, but we need to see the details and we need to be clear that this is not the Government palming off their responsibilities to communities that will take a long time to organise. The unexplained security concerns that the Home Secretary mentioned cannot justify our taking a different response from our neighbours. Indeed, we share an open land border with Ireland, which has just made the very move that we are suggesting. None of this adds up. Will the Department stop this public relations exercise of picking numbers out of a hat to justify its miserly response? Whether it is 100,000 or 200,000, these are complete and utter works of fiction designed to get the Home Office out of a hole.

Finally, the Home Secretary mentioned her awful anti-refugee Bill. How can she justify legislation that would criminalise Ukrainians who arrive here seeking asylum outside the scheme she announced today?

Priti Patel: I have to say that I find the hon. Gentleman's comments quite offensive. They are insulting in every single way. *[Interruption.]* For the first time, the SNP should stop playing politics. At every single stage, and on immigration issues in particular, I recognise and appreciate that we have a fundamentally different point of view.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Get on with your job.

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr MacNeil, I expect better. You have been chirping—*[Interruption.]* Let me finish. I do not want you chirping all the way through. I want to make sure that you get a question, and your question will be important. Do not waste that opportunity.

Priti Patel: Thank you, Mr Speaker. You effectively asked the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) to be quiet. He contacted me with a case at the weekend—I think it was on Sunday—and he had a response within minutes. That response came from me, as I picked up the case personally, so I do not need to be told to get on with my job, thank you very much.

The SNP, rather than making these really quite offensive points—

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): They're not offensive; they're reasonable.

Priti Patel: They are offensive and not reasonable. I am very sorry that the SNP does not want to listen to a word I have to say, but there has to be recognition that we have been working across Government for weeks with countries in the region and with the Ukrainian Government to provide the schemes and assistance for which they have asked. This is not a case of just saying there is carte blanche to do x, y and z. We are developing the schemes in conjunction with them.

We have known about the crisis on the ground for a considerable period of time, and we have also known about the need for surge capacity in the region. That work has been taking place. As I have already said, helping people should be our priority, not speaking about systems and processes. We are circumventing that to make sure we have the facilities in place to triage cases for those who want to come here, while also providing support to those who want to stay in the region.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I want to get everyone in, so let us help each other because this is a very important statement. Please hold your fire until it is your question, and then make sure that you put the question. Let us work to help each other.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary's response to the calls for generosity from many of us, which is what I expected. This is a much more generous system, but, quite properly, she has taken time to make it work practically. However, I want to raise a practical issue. As she said, the numbers are not clear. Some have forecast a total of 4 million will come out of Ukraine, and it may be 5 million or 6 million, so our share of that burden would probably be about half a million people. A significant number of them—perhaps a majority—will be women and children, not whole-family units, so the burdens on housing, education and social support will be bigger than anything we have seen before. Has she had discussions yet, or will she have discussions, with our European colleagues to ensure that that burden is shared across the whole continent? That is the only way in which we can look after these people properly.

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am frequently in touch with Commissioner Johansson on these issues. I appreciate that everyone said yesterday that the EU has moved quickly, but actually it has made an announcement and it is still discussing how, in practical terms, it can establish temporary protection measures and activate its schemes. We must all step up. In fact, colleagues in the Department are already speaking to the devolved Administrations with informal talks having happened in recent weeks. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will play a pivotal role.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for making this statement after the confusion following yesterday's attempt to inform the House of her plans. I want to ask about the humanitarian sponsorship pathway, which I think she said was to be led by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up. What role will the Home Office play in that? What resources will it be putting into the pathway? When does she expect that the first Ukrainians will arrive under the pathway? I know she said that she cannot estimate numbers, but what is her best guess of how many will be eligible under the scheme?

Priti Patel: I will be very frank: we do not know at this stage. The Secretary of State for Levelling Up will make statements and share with the House in due course details of the community scheme specifically. That is under development, so I cannot tell the right hon. Lady the potential numbers that will come through the route.

In terms of the Home Office role, this is a whole-of-Government effort. We will continue to support people in coming over, giving them the status that they need and securing their paperwork as well as all the essential pieces in which we always play a role, but this is an effort in joining up across Government. To be candid, we are learning lessons off the back of previous schemes including the Syrian resettlement scheme and the Afghanistan scheme, where there is still so much work to do. That goes to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) about accommodation and infrastructure in our own country. We must be honest about how we can support the people we do bring over.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I heartily congratulate my right hon. Friend on a compassionate and balanced response, reflecting the warm welcome that we want to give families reuniting and respecting that so many families will want to be supported in the region so that they can go back to Ukraine as soon as possible. I was informed that a hotel in my constituency is being prepared for Ukrainians coming to the United Kingdom. I am delighted about that, and I know that many constituents will want to support them. Will my right hon. Friend therefore update the House on what our communities can do to support those who will, I hope, be arriving soon?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is right. I spoke to the Ukrainian ambassador prior to coming to the House, and we see on our screens how difficult things are in Ukraine and in the region. The best thing that the British people can do is give a warm welcome to people

from Ukraine who are coming here. As colleagues have referenced, it will inevitably be women and children because of the Ukrainian Government's conscription policy with men staying behind and fighting. There will be a lot to do—we will want to get children into schools and ensure that they can continue their education. I reflect from my conversations with Governments in the region, my Ukrainian counterpart and the ambassador that these people want to be able to go back to rebuild their country, so the human capital point will be so important. We cannot underestimate the impact that skills, education and the ability to feel safe and secure will have on people, and that is where we can really make a difference.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): There are two mothers and three children who have now reached Poland, having fled the violence in Ukraine. One mother and her child—they are my constituents—have pre-settled status and British citizenship respectively, so they can return. Her sister, along with her two children—they are all Ukrainian nationals—fled with them and are refugees with nowhere to go, but they have a family in Leeds who will give them shelter. Under the policy that the Home Secretary has announced, can that mother and those two children come to the UK?

Priti Patel: The answer is yes. Would the right hon. Gentleman like to send me the details?

Hilary Benn indicated assent.

Priti Patel: Thank you.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): In a letter that I and more than 40 colleagues from the one nation caucus wrote to the Prime Minister yesterday, we asked for a flexible and pragmatic approach to the problem, because this is not just another migration crisis but a crisis of war. In that context, I very much welcome the humanitarian sponsorship pathway that the Home Secretary announced. I appreciate that it is in the early stages, but can she give any more details about the responsibilities that the sponsors, whether individual or corporate, will incur? What will they have to do to be sponsors? If the Government get that right, the pathway will tap into an enormous well spring of generosity in the British public, which is exactly what is needed in this terrible crisis.

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I pay tribute to him and thank him for his work and support in the area. He will understand the remit well from his previous roles in Government. I am afraid that I cannot share those details on sponsorship—I do not have them because of the cross-Government nature of the work. However, he made an important point about the generosity of the British people. We should be mindful of how we have been overwhelmed with so many offers of support from businesses, the community and the diaspora community. In my experience of setting up the British national overseas scheme for people fleeing Hong Kong, the community came together well, and we are taking some of the key component learnings from that to apply to this scheme.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I think we need to stand united—end of. The Government have said, quite rightly, that they want to sanction Duma members and members of the Russian Federation Council, but they

[Chris Bryant]

have not been able to do so yet. Alisher Usmanov has already been sanctioned by the EU although not yet by the UK, but I suspect that he will be on a UK list pretty soon, and Everton should certainly be cutting ties with him. I think Roman Abramovich is terrified of being sanctioned, which is why he is going to sell his home tomorrow, and another flat as well. My anxiety is that we are taking too long about these things, and I have a suggestion that might help. I fear that the Government are frightened of lawyers' letters from all these oligarchs' friends. One way to circumvent that is if Ministers read into the record, in a proceeding in Parliament, all the sanction criteria, because then they would be protected.

Priti Patel: The hon. Member makes a valid point, as ever—I worked with him on such issues in the past on the Foreign Affairs Committee. It is taking time. As he and hon. Members will be aware, there are lots of legal reasons for that. I do not want to cut across the work that the FCDO is doing on that right now. A lot of detailed work is taking place on sanctions, and much of it is coming to the House pretty soon.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. Conservative Members are particularly pleased with her announcement about the humanitarian sponsorship pathway. I have listened carefully to her assurances that she will work closely with colleagues at the Department for Levelling Up to ensure that the scheme avoids the pitfalls of the past, which is important, bearing in mind the rapidity of what is happening. Half a million people have been displaced from Ukraine in a week, and the numbers will rise into the millions. It is therefore vital that she and my Government step up to the plate, as Governments have done in the past, and show that this country is capable of not just action against aggressors but the compassion that has made it a great place to live.

Priti Patel: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend—he is a great friend on this and many other issues. Sadly, in the current age we have seen too many crises and too many people displaced around the world, and as ever, every scenario and circumstance needs a unique and bespoke response, and that is what we are doing. The BNO and the Afghanistan responses were very different, and this is a fitting response that—I wish to emphasise this to all colleagues—has been developed with our partners in the region and with the Government of Ukraine.

Joanna Cherry: May I associate myself with the measured and well made comments from my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald)? He is one of the most well respected, well informed and reasonable Members of the House, and all he was trying to say was that systems and process are essential to getting this right. In that spirit, may I ask the Home Secretary about a constituent's parents? They have been granted visas to travel to the United Kingdom but their documents were at the visa application centre in Kyiv, which is obviously now closed. Over the weekend they fled the fighting in Donbas. They are making their way overland to a third country—I do not want to say exactly where for reasons of their safety—and they are hoping to fly to the

United Kingdom. What steps is the Home Secretary taking with Border Force officials to ensure that visa holders, such as my constituent's parents, who arrive in the UK without the correct physical documentation—that is through no fault of their own, because that physical documentation existed but they could not get to it—receive a warm welcome and are given the access to this country to which they are entitled?

Priti Patel: There are a number of measures, and it is not just about Border Force—this is a conversation I had with the Ukrainian ambassador today—because of people without documents that can be verified, and all sorts of issues. We are trying to use both systems, out of country but in country as well. We have an operation in Lviv, in particular, trying to verify the data of those who are trying to leave, and match it against our systems. Quite a lot of work is taking place on this, but the hon. and learned Lady should provide me with details of the case she mentioned, and we will absolutely take it on board and pick it up.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): These welcome efforts will put huge extra strain on the Home Secretary's Department. May I urge her to bear in mind the situation of those other refugees who fled from Afghanistan to Pakistan, and who have been granted entry visas to this country but are stuck there because they entered Pakistan undocumented in an emergency? The Pakistani authorities could well grab them and send them back to a terrible fate in Kabul. Will she reach out to the Ministry of Defence to set in place safe extraction measures for those people who we have agreed can come here, but who cannot show themselves in Pakistan because our so-called ally is too close to the Taliban?

Priti Patel: I thank my right hon. Friend for that important point. The Afghanistan resettlement and the plight of Afghan refugees absolutely has not ended. As Members of the House will know, we welcomed more than 20,000 Afghan refugees, and the Minister for Afghan Resettlement, who is sitting on the Bench beside me now, is in constant contact with the MOD, and particularly with our Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office partners in Pakistan. There absolutely are challenges, and we cannot just move from one international crisis to another. We must continue to work on this issue, and that is a whole-Government effort. We are using the FCDO and the MOD to deal specifically with those cases.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): My constituent's mother went to the visa centre in Kyiv on 16 February 2021 to deliver her biometric fingerprints. She received confirmation that her application had been received eight days later. The family had not heard anything by August, so they contacted the Home Office. The reply they received stated that it was currently receiving a high volume of applications as a result of the significant increase in uptake, and that customers may experience a longer wait than usual for its decision. If there was an increase in demand as far back as August, what was done to address that? How many such cases are there? What will be done with the information in the visa centre in Kyiv, and what will be done to assist my constituent's mother?

Priti Patel: I cannot answer on the specifics of that case, but if the hon. Gentleman emails the details to me this afternoon I will pick that up. As I have outlined, across our centres we are united in our databases and the information that we have. I will pick up that case this afternoon and look at it further.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): May I strongly commend my right hon. Friend for her tremendous work in this field? She has enormous problems to deal with, and I am sure the House will be united in supporting her, the Prime Minister and the Government in this national emergency. Will she do everything possible to ensure that the Nationality and Borders Bill—currently in the House of Lords—which she has indicated needs to be amended, will be enacted as soon as possible? Will she urge the House of Lords to take the measures necessary to get that legislation on to the statute book as soon as possible?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and for his absolute support on this, and he is absolutely right. Operationalising legislation is not straightforward but we are already working on plans to do that. That is why there is a big effort to ask our colleagues in the Lords to send the legislation back here so that we can get it done.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Over the weekend the Prime Minister evoked the parable of the good Samaritan when he visited a Ukrainian church in London. In that parable, the good Samaritan is generous and compassionate when he stops to help a complete stranger. He does not stop to check their family connections, whether a suitable sponsorship scheme has been set up, or their papers. Although today's statement is a welcome step forward, will the Home Secretary go still further and establish urgently a scheme that is open to all those fleeing war and persecution right now at the hands of Putin's forces?

Priti Patel: This statement is specifically about Ukraine, and the measures I have announced today will build on the wider work that is taking place in Government. We are operationalising the schemes, and there will be further announcements about the wider work, the sponsorship scheme, and things of that nature that will be brought forward. All our work on humanitarian aid relief, resettlement and support of refugees is based on our work directly with the Ukrainian Government and countries in the region.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I warmly welcome the changes that the Home Secretary has set out, and I say gently to SNP Members that it is important to keep biometric checks in place. I still remember what happened in Salisbury. The Putin regime will not hesitate to send agents here to kill British citizens, and it is the Home Secretary's job to ensure we keep people safe. I commend the work that our intelligence agencies have done to give us advance notice of what was going to happen. I urge the Home Secretary to continue looking at that intelligence, so that we keep our offer flexible and commensurate with the threat faced by our Ukrainian brothers and sisters.

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I thank him for his comments and understanding on this. Our intelligence and security agencies have been there right from the outset. That is not just recent information, but information that has been in place for many months, dating back to early last year. Security checks are significant, and such issues are debated often in this House, including with regard to the evacuation from Kabul last year. We know what Putin's regime is capable of, and not just in Ukraine but on the streets of the United Kingdom. Our country has suffered at the hands of Putin and his regime, and we must do everything we possibly can to protect our country and its citizens.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I note the very strong emphasis on community sponsorship in the Home Secretary's statement. I am a supporter of community sponsorship, which provides a fantastic welcome for refugees who come through that route, but it requires a huge amount of work by community groups, and many hurdles to be jumped over at the Home Office. Can the Home Secretary confirm that she really thinks that it is an appropriate and fit-for-purpose route for the scale and immediacy of the challenge that we face? Would it not be better for the Home Office to be doing that work, to allow communities simply to do the job of very quickly welcoming people who arrive here and who can already be supported in situ?

Priti Patel: I come back to my earlier remarks about working with the diaspora community. This is something that has been asked for specifically, working with the ambassador as well. This will not be Home Office led. The Home Office has a role to play, but this is a whole-of-Government effort, which is why the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will lead on the community engagement piece, and work with communities on this.

Linked with community sponsorship, we still have to work through the elements of infrastructure, housing, education and the key access to public services. It is a whole-of-Government effort, not just with the Home Office, but there will be further announcements on this to come.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend on what I think is the right approach. I listened with surprise to the Opposition saying that there should be no process. It does not help the refugees themselves if we have a completely chaotic situation.

Can my right hon. Friend tell the House what work she is doing with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees? The number of people coming out of Ukraine means that this will have to be a global response, not simply a European one.

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Again, having a united response on this is really important; I do not just mean in this House but internationally. That is why I am not underplaying the emphasis on working with our partners and friends in the region, the Ukrainian Government and UN agencies.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) spoke about transport and things of that nature. We will have to work with our partners—the

[Priti Patel]

UNHCR, and other UN aid agencies, third parties and countries—in terms of how to bring people to the UK, and potentially to create humanitarian corridors to still try to help people to get out of Ukraine. There is a lot of work taking place, not just in the UK with the British Government but working with partners and agencies. We cannot under-emphasise that work at the time of this crisis, or the number of people who are on the move right now.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): What a lot of people do not understand, including me, Secretary of State, is why it is not possible to keep the security checks while matching the EU's generous three-year visa-free entry offer.

Priti Patel: I have made my point on security checks. We have been the target, basically, of Putin's Russia. On the EU's approach, the EU is still discussing how it intends to operationalise its mechanism. I am in touch with the commissioner. As soon as I know more from the commissioner, obviously we will work with them. We are not working in isolation: I want to make that quite clear to all colleagues. We are working with everyone. Of course, that also means sharing information and helping each other out. As I have said, this is an evolving situation.

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): I welcome the offer that the Home Secretary has announced to the Ukrainian people at this moment of desperate need, and her reassurance that there will be no limit on the numbers of Ukrainian people who can enter the United Kingdom under one of the qualifying schemes.

A constituent of mine emailed me today about his mother and father-in-law—Ukrainian nationals who have escaped the country and are now in a European country. They have applied for a visitor visa and have been told that they face a 15-day delay. Could I meet the Home Secretary, or one of her officials, to see what we can do to accelerate their safe passage to the United Kingdom?

Priti Patel: Of course. I say to all Members of the House who have cases coming to them that, as I have said, we will have staff in Portcullis House from tomorrow. We will write to all Members this afternoon with basic information about where to go with their cases. Of course, I am more than happy to pick up cases directly from colleagues, as I have been doing.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Receiving refugees here is the first step; how we treat them once they get here is just as important. I appreciate that the Home Secretary has said that that becomes a responsibility for the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Will she ensure that in that role he is now having urgent discussions with local authorities, which will be key to providing accommodation, education for children, social services support and mental health support? It is crucial that local authorities get the resources to do that. Indeed, it might be good if the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities could come to the House and make a statement on those matters.

Priti Patel: I absolutely understand and hear the points that the hon. Gentleman is making, with his experience across the board in local government. It is important to say that this is a whole-of-Government effort. We are one Government, and we are taking an integrated approach. He is right that we have to provide the services and infrastructure. Not all of that can materialise overnight.

We are absolutely working with local councils. Talks have been taking place informally with the devolved Administrations. This is absolutely ongoing, but as I have said, getting started is sometimes the hardest thing. It may be imperfect at the outset, but we know what kind of support we need to provide. It is the Government's objective and priority to ensure that we do the best that we can, working across the country with local authorities and across the whole of Government.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Following on from the question of the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), can my right hon. Friend say a little more? I accept that it is not her direct responsibility, but he asked about the cross-Government effort to ensure that refugees coming into this country are given a proper welcome. They may well be traumatised and have lost their principal family member. They may never see them again. They may require medical attention. They may be old. They may be young. Can we have a cross-Government effort to ensure that they are properly welcomed to this country?

Priti Patel: I give my hon. Friend that reassurance. This is a whole-of-Government effort. As I think I mentioned, we learn from previous efforts. Syria and Afghanistan were harrowing conflicts. People arrived in our country. I still speak to those who were involved in developing the Syrian scheme, the sponsorship scheme and the resettlement scheme. People came over who were traumatised and really sick. It was the same for Afghanistan, last year alone; I met many of those individuals and families as well. The situations are highly traumatic and deeply distressing. We are well aware of what needs to be provided, but it will be a national effort across all aspects of society.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Secretary of State alluded to the sponsorship pathway. Will she have discussions with the devolved institutions, so that there is a seamless approach in all parts of the United Kingdom? I assume that that would ensure that she would have discussions with at least one Sinn Féin Minister. Given that party's influence in terms of the Russian sphere of influence in the past, hopefully she will use her best endeavours to ensure that no political attitudes get in the way of a humanitarian approach across the UK.

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point. At a time such as this, there should be no room for political issues or political points. That is really quite important. The world is in crisis. Look at how the west has been threatened. Look at what is going on in Ukraine in terms of freedom and democracy being completely undermined. We have to stand united and together. Only by working together across the devolved Administrations, across the entire United Kingdom and, as I have emphasised, with our friends and partners in the region do we stand up to a tyrant such as Putin, and stand with the people of Ukraine.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Everybody wants to be humanitarian, and the Home Secretary is under pressure to have a visa-free scheme like the rest of Europe, but may I congratulate her on her proportionate response? We have to remember that, unlike the rest of Europe, we have uniquely liberal labour laws and we speak English, so we are the country of choice for mass immigration. I therefore urge her to listen to not only all the humanitarian voices but the voices of people in, for instance, Lincolnshire, where we feel we have really done our bit in terms of migration from eastern Europe. We are under extreme pressure in terms of housing and jobs. *[Interruption.]* I know that this is difficult to say, but we have to be honest about it. May I therefore be a correcting voice, and congratulate her on her humanitarian but proportionate response, and on not throwing away the immigration rulebook?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend makes some important points about the balanced and pragmatic approach that we are taking. First and foremost, as I have said to the House throughout this session, we have worked directly with our partners in the region and the Ukrainian Government. We have to understand their needs as well. We want to do the right thing by the people of Ukraine; there is no question about that.

I spoke about the significance of security checks and the fact that we are giving people who want to come to the United Kingdom the chance to live their lives freely, with access to public funds and work. Of course, people will need documentation and we have a system in place for that. We feel we are taking the right approach, working with our partners. As ever, though, we are in challenging and difficult times, and things could evolve. I have already pointed to the sponsorship group under development. It is right that we secure our frameworks for how we bring people over.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I have a constituent living here with his Ukrainian spouse of 22 years who wants to offer his home as a sanctuary to three family members fleeing the war in Ukraine and now heading to a third country. They are a niece and her young daughter, and a cousin's young daughter. However, the Government's Ukrainian family scheme does not include nieces and cousins. Most of us, I think, would say that our families include our nieces and our cousins. What can I tell my constituent about offering sanctuary and his home to his family members? Will the Secretary of State reconsider including other family members in the family scheme and the time limit of 12 months when other countries have allowed up to three years?

Priti Patel: As I said, if the hon. Lady wants to send me the details we will look into that.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I think most of my constituents would like us to be generous with the sanctuary that we offer to those fleeing besieged homes. The measures my right hon. Friend announced will allow people to turn their generosity into practical and direct action. Will she continue to work with organisations, such as the United Nations and the Red Cross, to look at how else we can best support those in need?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I want to come back to a point I made earlier on. The situation is very difficult in-region and in Ukraine. Inevitably,

UN agencies will be asked to do more and there will be more convening. It will not just be about money, but practical aid and support. We will continue to work with agency partners in the United Kingdom, because we have to integrate and join up how we help the people of Ukraine.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: As the Home Secretary knows, and I am glad she has already mentioned it, I have a constituent, Derek MacLeod, a businessman on the Isle of Lewis, who has 20 family members and in-laws—normal people who are now refugees—on the Poland-Ukraine border. The accommodation is there and we want them in the Hebrides, but so far red tape in London is stopping them from coming to Scotland. There is a simple question from Mr MacLeod: can the 20 come to the Isle of Lewis? As Mr MacLeod says, time is lives, and he and his wife are very concerned.

Priti Patel: That is a case that the hon. Gentleman has already been in touch with me about. We are looking into it.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am very grateful to the Home Secretary for coming to the House at the earliest opportunity to update us. As we know, women and children are fleeing through west Ukraine to get to safe countries, but they are obviously vulnerable to air attack by Russian aircraft. Has there been any discussion on creating a no-fly safe zone in western Ukraine for refugees? Did the Home Secretary discuss that when she spoke to the Ukrainian ambassador?

Priti Patel: We discuss all issues, some of which I cannot share on the Floor of the House because they are very sensitive in light of the attacks. I know my hon. Friend will respect that. Discussions are taking place constantly, but he is right to highlight just how dangerous, volatile and precarious the situation is. All of us are mindful of that as we work with our counterparts and our colleagues. I am speaking to many of my counterparts nearly every other day, plus ambassadors every single day. The situation is changing and we are hearing different reports. We are working in real time—real time—to provide all the support in the region and in-country in specific ways that can make a difference to people.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): Someone very dear to me who helped to raise me and who came to this country from Ukraine after the second world war would not have been eligible under any of the Home Secretary's schemes. Today's announcement, while welcome, is heavily caveated and still falls far short of what is needed. I want the Prime Minister to honour the words he spoke to me last week in this Chamber and put in place meaningful support for all those fleeing Ukraine. When will the Home Office start waiving visas and not just waving flags?

Priti Patel: I refer the hon. Lady to what I have said already in the House about the practical routes we are putting in place. *[Interruption.]* She can shake her head. I am sorry that she wants to be political, but we are putting in some very powerful routes that we will support. We do not know how many people will come over, but those routes have been developed in conjunction not just with our colleagues in the Ukrainian Government

[Priti Patel]

and other counterparts, but from the actual needs of people from what we are hearing in the region. She has heard me say very clearly that there are no caps on numbers.

We are creating schemes for people to come over, but that takes time. Not only that, but it also takes time to work with our colleagues in the region and work to meet their specific needs. I would like to think that the hon. Lady would respect that. It is not about the British Government just saying that we are starting up the scheme without actually working with people in-country or in the region on how it can be operationalised and how to ensure that it meets the needs of the people of Ukraine.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement and for highlighting the vital work being done behind the scenes to ensure that the scheme meets the needs of those fleeing the atrocities in Ukraine, and that it works with its neighbouring countries as well as recognises our own security needs. We would all like to do more to help the displaced people of Ukraine. Will she detail what practical things my constituents can do to help?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend highlights brilliantly the generosity of the British people in her own constituency. We are all grateful for that. It is important, as I have said a few times now in the discussions we have had in the House thus far, that we provide people with a warm welcome, and also work with local authorities, local councils, NHS trusts, schools, education and county councils. I think she met me recently to discuss issues relating to local government, policing and crime. It is about getting local organisations to come together and integrate the welcome that can be given and the services that can be provided.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Millions of people across the country are desperate to help Ukrainians fleeing Putin's monstrous and indiscriminate invasion by donating money and items desperately needed by Ukrainian refugees at thousands of sites across the country, including my constituency office. However, many of them are asking why Ireland and the EU can welcome all Ukrainians, yet their own Government refuse to do likewise. Ukrainian men, women and children are dying defending democracy and freedom, and they are dying for our freedom just as much as Ukraine's. What does the Home Secretary say to those Ukrainians she has deemed not worthy of refuge in this country?

Priti Patel: I am not even going to address the points the hon. Gentleman has made. I have spoken very clearly about the schemes. We are very clear. It is not just about our generosity. There are no limits. We are welcoming Ukrainian people to our country. The other point to make is that many Ukrainians want to stay in-region and we have to take a balanced approach. The Government are working in conjunction with the Ukrainian Government and the Ukrainian ambassador in London. We are understanding the specific needs—[*Interruption.*] He clearly does not want to listen to my comments, because he is just talking over me. I am addressing his

points. I am afraid it is obvious that the SNP has its own particular view and stance, which they are welcome to, but we are a Government working with our partners in-region and aid agencies to understand the situation on the ground and in the region.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I very much welcome the announcement today. Community sponsorship is absolutely the right approach to support refugees coming into this country. Of course, it does not come for free and volunteering is not free. I hope there might be some public funds available to support community groups, but perhaps even more helpfully, might my right hon. Friend work with the Charity Commission and charitable foundations to establish a philanthropic fund, so that people can make direct contributions themselves to support their neighbours who are supporting refugees?

Priti Patel: That is an excellent suggestion, and I will take it back to colleagues in Government to look at how we can develop it.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Scottish National party's position is that the refugees are welcome and that we should do everything in our power to offer sanctuary to people who need it. On that basis, and further to the question from the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), I note that the conflict has regional implications and that some of us are already starting to hear from constituents and business owners who have contracts in Belarus and elsewhere who want to flee Putin's aggression. What routes are already open to them and will the kind of announcement that the Home Secretary has made today be extended to other countries in the region?

Priti Patel: The routes are published on gov.uk, so the hon. Gentleman can see them, and I have outlined them this afternoon. In its response, the whole United Kingdom stands shoulder to shoulder with the people of Ukraine. As I have said several times in the House, that means an effort across the whole country to provide support and accommodation, and discussions are under way with the devolved Administrations.

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her work today to create new routes of entry for Ukrainians in the most invidious of positions and on her prior work for the BNO—British national overseas—citizens from Hong Kong and for Afghan nationals. It is a brilliant reflection of the British people's compassion. I have a constituent whose mother in Kyiv is elderly and infirm. The application centre in Lviv is critical and a lifeline to her to be able to come here. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that that application centre will remain open and that it will be as accessible as possible for those with disabilities?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. To give some context on Lviv, the take-up in recent weeks has been very low, but with that said, we are doing everything we can. I would like to pay tribute to our ambassador, Melinda Simmons, and the team in Lviv, who are doing outstanding work. It is because of her and her team that we are able to keep these operations up and running—I want to put all this into that particular context. We are relying on very brave people from our home team in-country to help Ukrainian people, and I

come back to my point about cases: please send us details and we will work with them to ensure that we can provide the support that is necessary.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Home Secretary is right to talk about the unity that we have seen in response to the appalling events in Ukraine. We need that unity in our response to the refugee crisis, and we need our response to reflect the mood of the public, who have seen the deeply moving images of women and children fleeing their country. Last night at a rally in Sheffield, one Ukrainian who is here on a temporary work visa pleaded for the right to bring his sister to the country. Will the Home Secretary confirm that the family reunion scheme that she has announced today will extend to him and others on temporary visas? In relation to others, will she seriously consider the resettlement scheme that has been proposed by the Refugee Council?

Priti Patel: We do not rule anything out. I restate to the House that we have been developing this response in conjunction with partners, and the situation is evolving. Again, the hon. Member has a specific case: I ask him please to send it to me and we absolutely will take a look at it.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): After successfully getting Russia suspended from the Council of Europe, I wish my right hon. Friend the best of luck with Interpol. Given the uncertainty over the future direction of this crisis, talking with the Ukrainian authorities and those of the neighbouring countries will be absolutely essential. If she needs any help in doing that, I am very willing to participate and to help her out.

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for his practical support. I would like to take him up on that offer, particularly regarding his work on the Council of Europe, which I congratulate him on as well. He speaks about the power of being united by showing what can be achieved collectively. That applies to trying to suspend Russia from Interpol systems for very good reasons. We know extensively of Russia's history of abusing red notices. We absolutely support Ukraine in that effort—it is so important to say that. I have spoken to my counterpart in the UAE, because it has a key figure in Interpol. We are working with other key nations as well. I absolutely would like to take my hon. Friend up on his offer, because we have to keep the dialogue going in-region, so that we know about the support that is needed, hear about the situation on the ground and can act in real time.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I hope that today's statement will offer much needed certainty to constituents of mine who are desperately worried about the safety of their family members, but I would be grateful if the Home Secretary could clarify two particular examples that have been shared with my office. First, will adult siblings and their dependent children be able to join their UK family under the Ukrainian family scheme? Secondly, will unaccompanied grandchildren be able to do the same?

Priti Patel: The answer is yes, and I highlighted in my statement the family route and the family scheme. If the hon. Gentleman has any particular cases that he would like to share, I would be more than happy to take them up.

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): As my right hon. Friend said, the Government are operating on the assumption that the vast bulk of Ukrainians who come to the UK will want to go home as swiftly as they can. Given that assumption, which seems entirely right to me, does that not mean that the Government can be more generous in their immigration approach than they would otherwise be, both in terms of immediate family members—I very much welcome her redefinition of that—and in the simplicity and flexibility of the humanitarian sponsorship pathway? May I also ask her about the not wholly improbably scenario that men who have fought in the Ukrainian conflict as part of the Ukrainian forces will wish to come back to the UK to be reunited with their families here? I would be grateful if she could confirm that her Department is prepared for that eventuality.

Priti Patel: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right. We do not know what tomorrow will bring and we have to be clear about that—we really do not know. We have seen the day-to-day changes and everything else that has taken place in Ukraine and it is going to be harrowing for us all to see it every day, and even harder for the families, mothers, wives and sisters who have left their loved ones behind. I want to be very clear that we are not ruling anything out in terms of not just flexibility, but the approach that we need to take. We just do not know what the outcomes will or could be. That is why we are having daily discussions with representatives in the region and with the Ukrainian Government.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): My constituent's sister and children have fled Ukraine to Poland, where they have been welcomed on a 14-day green card. When she called the number provided by the Home Secretary, she was directed to the citizens advice bureau. Why is the Home Secretary continuing the piecemeal approach of picking up casework from the Floor of the House instead of having a comprehensive, compassionate approach, like other EU nations that are much flexible? And why is she directing my constituent to the citizens advice bureau?

Priti Patel: I was not aware of that, and I recognise the tone of the hon. Lady's comment. I will pick that up, absolutely—[*Interruption.*] Yes, I need to find out what has happened. Had she notified me of this before, I could have looked into it. However, she is raising it now and I will look into it. As for the point on Europe, I have commented that it is still working through what it is going to do.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): My constituent writes in the past few hours:

"My only brother with his two small children and wife are hiding in the shelter under their home not knowing what the next hour will bring, gradually running out of food and basic supplies".

For those of us with small children, that is unimaginable. The Ukrainian family scheme is really good news for that family, and I thank the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister for listening to their Back Benchers on that. The UK is big-hearted and generous, as always. Will the Home Secretary say a bit more about the humanitarian sponsorship pathway? A church in the Chandler's Ford bit of my constituency has been in

[*Steve Brine*]

touch during her statement to say that it wants to help. How can it even express an interest at this stage to get the ball rolling?

Priti Patel: First, if my hon. Friend sends me the details of the church, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will pick that up through the sponsorship group. We are working in fast time on all this and things are moving very quickly. As he said, he has been contacted during this statement. We want to take up every single sort of offer and a lot of co-ordination is taking place in Government.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): Today, we are rightly focusing on the terrible situation in Ukraine, but I stress the importance of not forgetting the Afghans who are still trying to flee Afghanistan and those who are caught in the asylum system in the UK. On Ukraine, I am aware of Afghan refugees who have already fled one war who currently have asylum in Ukraine, and there are other non-Ukrainian nationals who need to flee Ukraine. Will the Home Secretary clarify whether the various routes that she has outlined are open to people who want to flee Ukraine but who are not Ukrainian?

Priti Patel: Obviously, the situation is developing, but I have outlined specific family and sponsorship routes, and also the community sponsorship route, and there will be information coming on that. I cannot today talk about other categories of people who are not Ukrainian coming to the UK. Clearly, a lot of work is under way right now. As I have said, we have to look at everything, and we are currently doing so.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): Quality of life for asylum seekers when they arrive here in the UK has to be paramount. Our broken asylum system sees tens of thousands of asylum seekers bogged down in the system, with families stuck in hotel rooms for over 18 months. In the light of this, does my right hon. Friend agree with me that we need to fix this system quickly to ensure that all asylum seekers, whether from the Ukraine or others, have the quality of life they deserve as they are being processed here in the UK?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. May I take the opportunity to thank him for all his work, because he was a great support to me while he was the Home Office Whip, and he fully understands the work the Government have been doing. There is a very important point here, which I have touched on already: we need the capacity in the infrastructure. We are a big-hearted nation, and with that we of course need the provision and the accommodation. This is where it is in effect a nationwide effort, with local authorities across the country, the NHS and education coming together to provide the services that people need.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I am assuming from the Secretary of State's statement that a constituent's elderly mother, who previously visited on a tourist visa, now expired, would be considered for the Ukrainian family scheme. Could the Secretary of State also clarify whether individuals who have in the past

had a successful visa application and are well known to the Home Office will have their applications fast-tracked as a result of applying for the Ukraine family scheme?

Priti Patel: We will have to look at the individuals coming forward, because not everybody who has previously had a visa may want to come, but the family scheme will capture a considerable number of family members. Obviously, those who have been here before will be eligible to come within the family route, and we will make sure that that works.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): As might be expected of a former Immigration Minister, I pay tribute to all the hard-working Home Office staff, particular those in region. Community sponsorship works—it really does—and we have long been recognised as global leader in it. Can I be reassured that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will make sure that this scheme works at pace, however, because that is one of the biggest lessons we have had to learn? We need this to work quickly because people are being bombed as they try to flee Ukraine. We often hear the language of burden sharing when we talk about refugees, but it is not a burden. We should regard it as a privilege to be in a position to help.

Priti Patel: I echo the last words that my right hon. Friend used, because it is an absolute privilege—it is a dreadful phrase actually—for us not just to stand up in the world but give support to other human beings. She is absolutely right about community sponsorship, which we looked at for other schemes last year—Afghanistan and all the rest of it—and it works but needs to be stood up fast. Standing up schemes fast also means that they sometimes fall over if they are not set up properly, and we intend to ensure that we have the basics in place. As I have said, we need the accommodation, the facilities, and the wraparound support and care that are so important. We are building on lessons from previous schemes, but we are also working across Government to look at how we can bring it in fast.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The contrast between the desperate scenes of ordinary Ukrainians fighting for their lives or fleeing for their lives and the Home Secretary's condescending and complacent "we are already doing so much we should be praised" statement is deeply troubling, especially given the long delays and numerous failings of the Afghan citizens settlement scheme and the asylum system more generally. Can she tell me whether a constituent of mine who is British and his Ukrainian partner can expect to be able to welcome her brother and sister, niece and nephew, and grandfather or grandmother, regardless of her immigration status?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady can send in the case and we will pick it up.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. It is clear that this is not a business-as-usual immigration exercise or mass economic migration; this is women, children and elderly people fleeing for their lives, and not knowing if they will see their fathers, sons, brothers or husbands ever again. I welcome the compassionate

set of measures that my right hon. Friend has announced today. Does she agree that as well as providing safe haven for refugees fleeing the conflict, it is equally important that we throw every single economic and diplomatic sanction at the Russian regime and send the very clear message to Putin that he must withdraw his troops and peace must be restored in Ukraine?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is not a moment for making flippant remarks or anything of that nature, which has obviously taken place in the House in some quarters today. This is a collective effort. Putin must fail. There is no equivocation here, and no ambiguity whatsoever. My hon. Friend speaks with great passion, and she is absolutely right about the implications and consequences. None of us can fail to be moved not just by watching what we see on our screens, but by some of the conversations—I have had some very harrowing conversations with my counterparts—that will concentrate people's minds as well as some of the wider implications we are seeing. We need Putin to fail. We have to be united. We have to apply every single economic, diplomatic and military measure, in a consistent and united way.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her tireless efforts in these difficult days. Many missionaries from Northern Ireland and from across the United Kingdom are serving in Ukraine and helping those in need. Likewise, the local response of gathering practical aid in my constituency is humbling and commendable. Can the Secretary of State tell us what is being done to work with the extensive church networks in Ukraine to deliver and distribute much-needed aid to those who are in need?

Priti Patel: The hon. Member makes a very important point. In fact, that was part of the conversation I had today with the ambassador. Aid in country is needed—it is absolutely needed—and getting aid into the country is a challenge. We should just be honest and level about this. It is not straightforward: with all the restrictions and the situation on the ground, it is very difficult. I just want to thank the missionaries and commend their work and that of all third parties. They are risking their lives to save other people's lives. A lot of work is taking place in this area, and the FCDO is leading on that humanitarian work. However, I want to emphasise that this is a very difficult area, and it is getting harder right now to get aid to people. This is exactly why the United Nations, the Red Cross and other agencies are really pulling together and coming together to help people in country.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The Home Secretary is right when she says that we do not know what is going to happen tomorrow or over the coming days, but one does not have to be an expert fortune teller to know that all of us across the House will be inundated by worried and concerned constituents trying to do the best for their friends and families. She has referenced, very helpfully, a new Member support service in Portcullis House and elsewhere. I know it is a small point in the general scheme of things, but can she flesh out a little bit more information about it? Will it be adequately resourced and will it be available to Members 24/7, because this is a crisis that does not sleep and does not rest?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. To emphasise his point, this is a crisis that does not sleep and does not rest: this is 24/7. We are standing up an operation tomorrow in Portcullis House, and we will obviously be working with all colleagues. I again urge them to bring any representation and cases to us directly. We will resource it accordingly, because we do expect the numbers to go up. We will be very frank and honest about that. In the same way, we will operationalise in region where we can, which will also mean bringing more people into the region. We are already working through our contingency planning, and we already have the FCDO teams out there through the rapid taskforce team. If that means we have to bring in more Border Force staff to go in and other people from UK Visas and Immigration, we stand ready and we are absolutely ready to do that.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Colleagues on both sides of the House were a little perturbed yesterday when the Home Secretary said:

“I urge colleagues not to attempt casework themselves”.—[*Official Report*, 28 February 2022; Vol. 709, c. 701.]

I am glad she has rowed back on that today in her statement. This session has shown the vital role that Members can play in bringing cases to the attention of Ministers where they need action. I welcome what she has said about that. I have listened carefully to her, and she said that she wanted to do things in a united and international way. I do not think she ruled out taking the approach of a temporary protection mechanism to allow access to public services. At the end of the day, do we really want to be a country that until recently was granting passports and privileges to Putin's friends but that will not waive visas for Putin's Ukrainian victims in their hour of need?

Priti Patel: If I may, I will clarify a couple of things to the hon. Gentleman. First, in terms of what I said about casework yesterday, Members raise casework on the Floor of the House, and that is absolutely fine—I have not said, “Don't do that”—but it is also the case that Members should bring cases directly in fast time. In fact, colleagues have emailed me since the weekend. I have been picking them up myself. Obviously it is much more efficient just to come to me directly. We are all 24/7; that is the nature of all our work. I have always said we will happily pick those cases up, rather than having Members waiting to bring them to the Floor of the House. That is the point I make.

I rule nothing out, but the point about visas is that having documentation of individuals is important, particularly when they come here to access public services, to gain employment and all those kinds of things, and the biometric checks are also important, and that is the point I have been making. We need to do those checks and to keep them in place. We will work with all colleagues. I am in touch with the commissioner in the EU. We have to learn from each other, because this is a real-time crisis, and things will probably get a lot worse, so we have to have the agility and flexibility to respond.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): My constituent Tania, who is a dual British and Ukrainian national, is very concerned about her mother and sister in Kyiv, who she told me this morning are trying to get a train to

[James Wild]

safety. Can I welcome the confirmation that my right hon. Friend has given today that, God willing they make it, this family can be reunited in King's Lynn?

Priti Patel: I say to my hon. Friend that clearly we will do everything we can to help and support. It is very difficult. He will know from his constituent that things are getting really hard in country.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituent's wife is a Ukrainian national who was granted a spousal visa last week, but in order to travel to the UK, she needs that visa added to her passport. The couple were in Poland when the invasion occurred, and neither the British embassy nor the third-party TLScontact can help. Can the Home Secretary therefore make urgent arrangements to allow the bureaucracy to take place in Warsaw, rather than their travelling back into the path of danger in Lviv, as the UK visas advice line asked them to do?

Priti Patel: I am sure that can be done, because that will be documents of permission to travel.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. In fast-moving circumstances, she is making absolutely the right calls, not least in the creation of the humanitarian support pathway. Further to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) earlier, history teaches us that infiltration is a well-known Russian tactic that is likely to be happening now. That is why we categorically must not drop the security and biometric tests.

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Infiltration is one aspect, but there is much wider security and intelligence information that points to why we need these checks. We know—I have said it already in this House—what Putin is capable of in terms of threats to our own homeland security. We saw that with Salisbury. People have died in our country, and it is right that we ensure we check those who come to the United Kingdom.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): A considerable number of the 650,000 refugees from Ukraine will try to make it to the UK. I welcome the support that the Government have announced and the compassionate words that the Home Secretary has used today, but I worry that under the current provisions of the Nationality and Borders Bill, those Ukrainians would be criminalised, because they would be passing through another country to get here. I sincerely hope that the Government will look at the provisions of the Bill again and look at supporting the Lords amendment to remove clause 11.

My question is this: I have a constituent with adult stepchildren and grandchildren in Ukraine who we hope to bring over, so can the Home Secretary confirm that the scheme she has announced today will include stepchildren and grandchildren?

Priti Patel: I absolutely reject the hon. Lady's comments about round the Nationality and Borders Bill, because this is the equivalent of a safe route and it is a Government-sponsored scheme. The answer to her question is yes, it is a Ukrainian families scheme.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I warmly welcome the Home Secretary's open and generous statement today, and I look forward to receiving details of how we in Sevenoaks can support it. Over the past week, I have been supporting my constituents Joanna and Sergei, who are both British citizens and are desperate to bring their family over to the UK. Sergei's sisters and parents are stuck in Ukraine, and I am extremely grateful that on the basis of the statement today, they will be able to come over here. Can the Home Secretary give some indication of how long she expects this process to take? She does not need me to tell her that every day is vital.

Priti Patel: No, and my hon. Friend is right to say that. I have said it already during the statement, but the situation is deteriorating—that is just a fact. We have been able to turn cases around in hours, but I do not want to give any false hope or expectation, because we have to look at everything from a case-by-case perspective, which we will do. If she follows up with me afterwards, we will pick this case up.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Home Secretary talks about vital security checks, but she needs to remember that we are predominantly talking about women and children, considering that adult Ukrainian males cannot leave the country anyway. As was pointed out, many people have already got visas in the past. My constituent's mother-in-law has managed to flee to Poland, but she has been told she has to travel three hours to an assessment centre that is much closer to the area of conflict. That is causing the family so much concern that they are looking to fly her to Ireland, where she can land without a visa. What happens if someone lands in Ireland? How do they then qualify to come over here? One other point is that my constituent's mother-in-law previously overstayed on a visa here, because Crimea was annexed and she could not get home at that time. Can the Home Secretary confirm that such things will not be a red flag or a barrier to re-entry?

Priti Patel: Absolutely. I would like to pick up both cases, and what I would say is please send the information to us, so that we can advise people of where they can go and save time in this process.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): My constituent Tatsiana, a legal UK resident, and her one-year-old baby, a British citizen, have been stranded for a week without any support from this Government. To be completely clear, this case has been followed through by email, and today my office has been told by the authorities that they do not believe their situation to be urgent. Does the Home Secretary agree, or will she intervene and urgently help Tatsiana and baby Maria to get home to East Dunbartonshire?

Priti Patel: Yes, of course. I will need to see the case, as well, because the hon. Lady is raising it for the first time. I will pick that up.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): When it comes to resettlement housing, perfection can sometimes be the enemy of the good. The Ministry of Defence leases 7,230 homes from Annington Homes, and they are unoccupied. We know that there are unoccupied local authority homes and other public estate, as well as

short-term holiday lets and other accommodation. Indeed, people want to open their own homes. Will the Home Secretary ensure that she is maximising the use of all the estate across the country, so that people are not languishing for months in hotels, but are placed in communities where they can start to rebuild their lives?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady has just made the case that I constantly make across Departments when it comes to accommodation. We do not want people in hotels. There is estate and Government land. There are also private sector options, so we can unite and work together on this.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Can the Home Secretary confirm what initial discussions have taken place with the Scottish Government and how the humanitarian sponsorship pathway will work in Scotland, so that local authorities and community and church groups, such as those in my constituency that are keen to help Ukrainians with no family ties in the UK, can do so apace?

Priti Patel: It is an important point. Discussions have taken place; the Immigration Minister started discussions last week with Neil Gray. Those discussions must take place on a near-daily basis. Particularly for the sponsorship route that I have just spoken about, there will obviously be further statements and updates to the House and there is a lot of work taking place in Government on it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I first thank the Secretary of State and her ministerial team for all that they are doing on the matter, particularly the Immigration Minister.

It is important to tell this story. A lady from my constituency who lives in Killyleagh contacted me on Sunday and I met her yesterday morning. She has two children and a husband living in Ukraine. She has lived

in my constituency for two years and works there. Her husband has been called up to fight in the army, which we understand, meaning that her 15-year-old boy and seven-year-old girl have to be looked after by elderly relatives who perhaps, with respect, cannot do so. She wants to get them home as soon as possible. Her option is to go there next week, on 7 March, to bring them home—the Immigration Minister has the information. I make a plea to the Home Secretary to ensure that she has the assistance that she needs so that she can get home to Northern Ireland with her children as soon as possible.

Many others in my constituency who have elderly relatives have also contacted me, and I understand that the Home Secretary is working on that as well. I also gave the Immigration Minister some information about Willowbrook Foods, which is offering jobs to Ukrainians. It already has a Ukrainian workforce and it is there, willing and able. People are generous—they are so great, we just cannot get over it.

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words and comments. He is absolutely right that we will hear many more cases of elderly relatives and grandparents—that is a fact—which is why we have created the family route. I have also been clear that we will give those who come here access to public benefits and the chance to work. We have an established diaspora community in the United Kingdom that works in key industries and key locations, and we will build on that. The Government, and not just the Home Office, have had many offers from employers who absolutely want to help.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the Home Secretary for so thoroughly answering a large number of questions. I have let this item of business run on for much longer than usual because it is so important and I recognise the strength of feeling in the House about it.

Points of Order

2.52 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your assistance, because Mr Speaker has generously granted me the end of day Adjournment debate tomorrow on the effectiveness of the Vaccine Damage Payments Act 1979. In anticipation of that debate, I tabled a series of named day questions. As of today, seven of those have been outstanding for more than one week and one of them, which names the 1979 Act, has been outstanding for more than six weeks. That seriously inhibits my ability to properly hold the Government to account, because I need answers to those questions before the debate begins. What can you do to ensure that the Department of Health and Social Care delivers?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. What I can do is repeat yet again what Mr Speaker has said so often from this Chair, which is that when Members submit questions, they ought to be answered on time. There is simply no excuse for them not to be answered. I repeat most emphatically what Mr Speaker has said many times before, as indeed have all his predecessors and mine, which is that it is simply not acceptable that Departments, which have hundreds and hundreds of civil servants to do that job, do not answer the questions of Members of Parliament.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful that the Home Secretary has stayed in her place. This is not to have a go at her but to make a suggestion. Parliamentary privilege is there for an important reason, which is that we can speak without fear or favour. Often, it is there so that we can speak without fear.

I note that the European Union has been able to sanction some oligarchs faster than we have, not because of any lack of will in the UK but because it uses a particular mechanism called non-legislative acts that attracts a degree of privilege. For example, when it says that Alisher Usmanov has been sanctioned, and puts a little paragraph about why, it does not have to fear what may then happen in the courts. In the UK, however, Ministers understandably want to ensure that everything is watertight and that things are done properly, but they are also nervous that the way we do it means that they might be open to legal challenge, which would obviously be disastrous and very expensive.

I wonder whether there is a means of using parliamentary privilege to help the Government to do that more swiftly. If necessary, I would be happy to sit in permanent session in Westminster Hall with Ministers sending names and we will read them out, or they could be submitted as answers to a permanent daily parliamentary written question to a Minister to ask, "Who are you sanctioning today?". Can the Clerk of the House and Mr Speaker have a conversation with Ministers in the Home Office and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office as quickly as possible to see whether there is a way for Parliament to help the Government do it more swiftly?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I genuinely thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, which may even genuinely be a point of order for the Chair, because it is about the operation of parliamentary privilege and concerns matters that take place in the Chamber. The hon. Gentleman has set out his thesis clearly and I observe that the Home Secretary has paid careful attention to what he has said.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel) *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Home Secretary is nodding her assent to what I am saying. It is also clear that all hon. Members in this House and in Parliament want to achieve what the hon. Gentleman has described as a course of action. Indeed, the Home Secretary reiterated that this afternoon. I think even the Clerks might be nodding. I hope that now the matter is on the record, it can be taken forward in the most appropriate manner. I am sure that anything that Mr Speaker or his office, or his Deputies, can do to help will be done.

BILL PRESENTED

ECONOMIC CRIME (TRANSPARENCY AND ENFORCEMENT)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Priti Patel, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Dominic Raab, Steve Barclay, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Elizabeth Truss, Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng, Damian Hinds and Paul Scully, presented a Bill to set up a register of overseas entities and their beneficial owners and require overseas entities who own land to register in certain circumstances; to make provision about unexplained wealth orders; and to make provision about sanctions.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 262).

Marine Protected Areas (Bottom Trawling)

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

2.58 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to regulate and limit the practice of bottom trawling in marine protected areas, and for connected purposes.

This is a significant change in tone and issue from the serious matters that we have just been discussing, but the process of our democracy must continue as well.

There is a growing consensus in this country that we need to do much more to protect our natural habitats, to ease the pressure on our wildlife and to play a part in reversing the catastrophic loss of biodiversity worldwide. As some hon. Members will know, I am passionate about reversing the deforestation that is destroying some of the world's most important ecosystems, but we must not and should not forget the importance of marine habitats here and internationally. The failure to protect the habitats beneath our seas not only puts even more pressure on a vast range of creatures but damages one of our most important carbon sinks.

I suspect that most hon. Members would think that the presence of marine protected areas covering about a third of our national waters plays a big part in ensuring that we look after our marine habitats. Sadly, the truth is rather different, because our marine protected areas do not offer a lot of protection at all, particularly for our seabeds. The area at the bottom of our seas, often populated by the smallest creatures that make up an important part of the natural food chains in our oceans, remains open to large-scale trawlers that drag nets along the bottom and destroy much of what is in their path. Some of the largest international vessels that do this are spectacularly damaging in the approach that they take, as they use enormous power to scoop up everything as they go and they have equipment that covers a vast area underwater.

Less than one hundredth of 1% of our waters is covered by the highest level of protection where all fishing is banned. Ninety-four per cent. of our MPAs permit this bottom trawling; only 6% do not. That in my view does not make these proper marine protected areas and I think the practice should stop, as indeed do a whole range of conservation groups. Right now, the Marine Conservation Society has a campaign to achieve this goal. I know the Minister is committed to the kind of improvements that we need, but we must make a difference.

In total, we have 372 MPAs, including coastal and offshore areas, making up a total of 38% of UK waters. We know that a significant number of those are far from being in good shape. Among the most important, around two thirds have significant habitat degradation, and bottom trawling is a key part of the problem, with the scalping of the seafloor leaving habitats with big challenges to recover.

It is not just fish and other marine species that suffer when bottom trawling takes place. Plants such as kelp and seagrass are important habitats in their own right,

but they are also important absorbers of carbon, and planting new areas with both is, and should be, an important part of tackling carbon emissions. However, there is no point doing that if bottom trawling destroys underwater plants such as kelp, and in our marine protected areas that simply should not happen.

I know the Government share my concern about the condition of our ocean floors. All too often a large scale net not only scoops up all of the wildlife on the bottom, but churns up and destroys the reefs and the sediment, which is an important carbon absorber, and actually releases carbon from the seafloor. All of this is why the Government have a commitment to properly protect 30% of our land and seas by 2030. The Fisheries Act 2020 paved the way for things to be done to deal with this issue at sea. It was a welcome recognition of how we need to improve things and a good step by the Government. This is one of the benefits that we have now that we are not tied down by the common fisheries policy. We can set new rules and regulations for our waters, which, during this decade, will enable us to totally transform the stewardship of the seas, without being subject to the diktat of Brussels. Outside the European Union, we are freer to improve our environmental standards in a way that we could not always do before, but we need to get on with it, and this Bill is designed to do that.

The Bill will have the effect of placing a duty on the Secretary of State, within 12 months of it receiving Royal Assent, to lay before Parliament regulations that ban bottom trawling in our marine protected areas. It will allow the Secretary of State and the Minister to make some very limited and careful exemptions, but only where they are necessary to support small-scale local fisheries and the smaller boats from our local ports, and then only when the evidence of the nature of the habitats in a particular area makes that possible. There are no circumstances in which any fishing boat should be dragging a net along the bottom of the most environmentally important areas.

I know that the fishing industry faces challenges. The growth of offshore wind energy, for example, has made fishing in other areas of the ocean more difficult than it has been in the past. I know, too, that the bottom of some parts of the existing protected areas is of little ecological value—the value is higher up in the water—and the Government may choose to look at that issue when shaping detailed plans. None the less, it cannot be in the interests of any of the fishing industry if the fish themselves have no protected place in which to grow and develop. If they cannot do that in our protected areas, then where on earth can they do so?

We know that restrictions, where they have been introduced on a limited scale, can make a genuine difference. A year ago, a local ban was introduced off the coast of Sussex because of particularly extreme damage to the kelp forests there which had had a serious impact on the local ecosystems. Evidence now from those people who are monitoring the outcome of that ban shows that those ecosystems have started to recover, and that surely must give us a signpost as to what needs to be done in our broader marine protected areas.

This Bill is based on a simple premise, which is that our marine protected areas should actually protect marine life. I think that that was the intention behind having

[Chris Grayling]

marine protected areas. I think it is what most people would imagine is actually already the case, and I suspect that they would be horrified to discover that that is not the case. It is time to rectify the situation. I know the Minister is keen to try to achieve the same. I hope the Bill will provide a degree of stimulus to get that job done quickly. This is a major environmental challenge for our coastal waters. It is one that we need to face up to, and it is one that we need to deal with. We must make sure that our marine protected areas are genuinely, absolutely and unreservedly marine protected areas, which is what they are supposed to be. I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Chris Grayling, Bob Seely, Sir Oliver Heald, Barry Gardiner, Andrew Selous, Neil Parish and Kerry McCarthy present the Bill.

Chris Grayling accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 263).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 16(1) (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents), proceedings on the motions in the name of Secretary Elizabeth Truss relating to the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2022 (SI, 2022, No. 194) and the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations 2022 (SI, 2022, No. 195) shall be brought to a conclusion not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion for this Order; the Deputy Speaker shall then put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on those Motions forthwith; such Questions, though opposed, may be put after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(Mark Spencer.)

Sanctions

3.7 pm

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): I beg to move,

That the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2022 (SI, 2022, No. 194), dated 28 February 2022, a copy of which was laid before this House on 28 February, be approved.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With this we shall consider the following motion:

That the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations 2022 (SI, 2022, No. 195), dated 28 February 2022, a copy of which was laid before this House on 28 February, be approved.

Michael Ellis: The instruments before us were laid under the powers provided by the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018—also known as the sanctions Act. These instruments came into effect at midnight last night.

As stated by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, we have announced the largest and the most severe package of punitive economic and trade sanctions that Russia has ever seen in response to Putin's pre-meditated, pre-planned and barbaric invasion. We will continue to ratchet up the pressure, working in concert with our allies around the world. We have already imposed sanctions on Vladimir Putin, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, five Russian banks, 120 businesses and a long list of Russian oligarchs. Taken together, this targets assets worth hundreds of billions of pounds. Throughout, we have worked with our allies, including to agree to remove selected Russian banks from the SWIFT system and we have agreed to target the Russian central bank, but we will go further. I want to say to this House that we will continue to stand with the Ukrainian people in their heroic efforts to face up to unbridled aggression and that nothing is off the table.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Let me take the right hon. and learned Gentleman back to what he said about the number of individuals who have been sanctioned, as I do not think it is hundreds since this situation in Ukraine—it is eight. It is hundreds since 2014, and that conflation is unhelpful. As I understand it, the Government are finding it difficult to get all their ducks in a row in relation to these individual oligarchs, and the European Union is doing this much quicker. I hope he heard what I said earlier, because I think that that is because the legislative measure used in the EU is more effective in providing legal certainty for the sanctioning body. Why do we not put names of people on our sanctions? There is not a single name on the measure before us. We do this in a very legalistic way and the danger is that Mr Abramovich will have sold everything by the time we get round to sanctioning him.

Michael Ellis: I note what the hon. Gentleman says, but it is not often that people refer to the mechanisms of the EU as speedy. If he says that they are speedier than ours, clearly that is something for the system to look at. But we have a system that we are using at the moment, that has applied and that is what we have to go through. We are acting faster than ever before and we are leading the way in this area.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Will my right hon. and learned Friend update the House on what action the Government are taking to deal with the loophole that remains Scottish limited partnerships? They remain popular with Russians and Belarusians in terms of being able to invest in property and raise cash in the UK, which undoubtedly goes to support some of the very people we are seeking to stop acting in the way that they are in Ukraine at the minute.

Michael Ellis: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and of course he is right to focus on those areas in particular, as he has a marked interest in them as regards Scotland. Where these measures are applied, they apply throughout the UK. We always want to look at any areas where he might bring issues to our attention, but these measures apply throughout the UK—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Michael Ellis: I want to make a little progress. Last night, we laid new legislation in Parliament on financial measures, including on sovereign debt; a prohibition to limit access to sterling; and a ban on any Russian company issuing securities or raising finance in the UK. That significantly further strengthens our arsenals of sanctions against Russia and it comes alongside increased trade measures, including a prohibition on sensitive “dual-use” items, which could be used by the military, and a ban on a further range of crucial industry goods, from high-tech to aircraft.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Michael Ellis: I am going to make a little progress and then I will give way. Sanctions announced by the UK and our allies are already having an impact. Yesterday, the rouble dropped 40% of its value, before closing 25% down; central bank interest rates have more than doubled, from 9% to 20%; international businesses are quickly divesting, as we have been hearing in the media; and the rouble is now trading at about a quarter of what it was when Putin took power. That will have an impact on the institutions that prop Putin up and that prop his cronies up.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I appreciate all that my right hon. and learned Friend is doing, but we are talking about the cronies and not the institutions as well. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is right; I do not see why we cannot just use privilege in this House to name some of the three dozen “dirty oligarchs”. Why can we not use privilege? What law firms and lawyers are holding this up? How much money—how many billions of pounds—will have fled the country by the time we nail these people down?

Michael Ellis: We work with our allies around the world on names. This is an effort between allies; we co-operate and discuss the matters, and officials work on that. The idea is to continue to work with our allies to bring forward further sanctions and press for further collective action to reduce western reliance, for example, on Russian energy.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I want to pursue the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), because 23 people on the

EU sanctions list are not on the UK sanctions list. There are some surprising omissions—not just the oligarchs on the Navalny list, but the commanders in chief of the Black sea fleet, of Russian aerospace forces and of the Russian navy, and the Russian Defence Minister. We need a timetable for adding these people to the list. Crucially, I want to draw the Minister’s attention to paragraph 3.1.3 of the general guidance on sanctions implementation, which states:

“The everyday use by a designated person of their own economic resources for personal consumption is not prohibited.”

I would like the Minister to look at how we actually prohibit the use of the mansions, the jets and the economic assets that these people own. I do not just want them frozen; I want them put beyond use.

Michael Ellis: Nothing is off the table. Everything is being considered and is open for consideration. We have rightly taken unprecedented moves, which have been extremely rare in international precedent, if not unheard of, and which go further, in many instances, than what our allies have done. We have led the way in a number of different areas. That is not to say that there is not more still to do. I accept that there is, which is why I say that nothing is off the table.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Michael Ellis: Let me make a little progress and then I will give way. The solidarity of NATO is resolute, which is why the UK and our NATO allies have been moving troops to our NATO allied states. We will continue to support the legitimate Government of Ukraine and the people of Ukraine in their self-defence against this attack by Vladimir Putin. Let me reinforce this point: we are going to use every lever under our control to that end.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I suppose the frustration is that we have been told for a long time that economic crime and kleptocracy and the proceeds of economic crime are going to be clamped down on, yet very little that is effective has happened. Now we are hearing something similar from the Minister. What is he doing to beef up enforcement to ensure that these sanctions are actually going to bite? We can have the best sanctions in the universe if we are not enforcing them; they need to be enforced, and fast.

Michael Ellis: These powers will have a maximum penalty of up to 10 years’ imprisonment, so that is a “bite” if they are breached.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): It seems that the legal test required to sanction an individual is too high, because the Departments responsible are clearly struggling to amass sufficient evidence to meet that test—evidence such that they feel will be able withstand judicial review or legal challenges by the individuals concerned, who understandably will put together a serious legal team to challenge them. Anyone would do that and that is their legal right. What can this House do, through legislation, to assist the Minister and the Government in making that legal bar easier for them to reach? That is the challenge that Members on both sides of the House are raising today.

Michael Ellis: The House is as one on the wish and the need to apply these measures as expeditiously as possible. But of course my right hon. Friend is right to say that we have to do it properly, not least because a number of perfectly legitimate and lawfully acting UK businesses would be affected by these sorts of measures. It is right that they should not be injuriously affected by what occurs. It is right that, when we are imposing sanctions of up to 10 years' imprisonment for a violation of these measures, we are also cautious in seeing that they are done properly. I can assure the House that we are working through names, but it takes time. There is a high burden of proof and we will work through it.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The reason we co-ordinate with our allies is to make our policies effective. If the process of co-ordination takes so long that people can remove their assets beyond our reach and prepare their legal defences so that we cannot overwhelm them, we are defeating ourselves—we are pursuing headline actions without effect. Surely we should limit the extent to which we delay those things and get on with it straightaway.

Michael Ellis: I am so pleased that my right hon. Friend says that, because that is exactly what we are doing. The greatest expedition is being applied to this matter.

The legislation follows the made affirmative procedure, as set out in section 55(3) of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018. I know the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is familiar with that and supported it strongly in this House both in 2018 and before. The legislation follows the process of that Act, so I have no doubt he will support it. These statutory instruments amend the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 and, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced, the powers they contain will prevent Russian banks from accessing sterling.

This is a significant and new measure for the United Kingdom. Russian banks clear no less than £146 billion of sterling payments into and out of the United Kingdom's financial system every year. Without the ability to make payments in sterling, designated banks will not be able to pay for trade in sterling. They will not be able to invest in the United Kingdom. They will not be able to access the UK's financial markets. This measure matches the power the United States already has to prohibit access to the US dollar, and shows our joint resolve with our American allies to remove Russia from the global financial and trade system. Around half of Russian trade is denominated in dollars or sterling.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): The objective of sanctions is to limit the escalation of hostilities. I hope we are able to effect that through these measures, but does the Minister not accept that the list exists in some form, as has already been referred to, and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has already outlined a remedy? Surely it is not beyond the wit of man for us to come together to make these sanctions work and avert an escalation of hostilities?

Michael Ellis: That is what we all want to do. These measures will work; the reality is that they follow the mechanism outlined in the 2018 Act.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Ellis: I must make some progress. Around half of Russian trade, as I have said, is denominated in dollars and sterling. We have already used the power to designate Sberbank, the largest Russian bank, and the same statutory instrument prevents the Russian state from raising debt here and isolates all Russian companies. I emphasise that again, because here we are going further than many of our allies, who have picked out a number of companies that they think may be closely connected with Putin.

With this statutory instrument, we prevent the Russian state from raising debt here and isolate all those Russian company—by the way, there are about 3 million of them. They will now be prevented from gaining access to UK capital markets. This measure goes further than those of our allies and bans all Russian companies from lucrative UK funding.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the banking measures provide an immediate ban? The effect is that if there are debts owed that should be paid into Russian banks, they will not be. That creates an immediate economic shock and plays an important role in doing so.

Michael Ellis: My right hon. Friend is certainly right that it creates an immediate economic shock. That is why the effect on the interest rates and on the rouble is as we have already seen: within hours, the shock to the economic system is significant.

Russian businesses listed in London have a combined market capitalisation of more than £450 billion, or nearly half a trillion pounds. That is the money we are talking about. It includes some of Russia's largest state-owned enterprises, and the Kremlin is hugely reliant on those tax revenues. Banning them from raising debt in London will further increase—massively so, I submit—the burden on the Russian state. Global giants such as Gazprom will no longer be able to issue debt or equity in London. In the past seven years, Russian companies have raised £8 billion on UK markets.¹ That ends today.

The second piece of legislation will ban exports to Russia across a range of items, including those on the dual-use list and other goods and technology critical to Russia's military-industrial complex, including its maritime and aviation sectors. It will also ban a range of technical and financial services related to such items. By enacting this measure in alignment with the United States, the European Union and other partners, we will collectively cut off much of Russia's high-tech imports. Those include critical high-end technological equipment such as microelectronics, telecommunications, sensors and marine and navigation equipment. It will blunt Russia's military-industrial and technological capabilities, it will gradually degrade Russia's commercial air fleet, and it will act as a drag on Russia's economy for years to come.

The Department for International Trade and Her Majesty's Treasury will offer advice and guidance to UK businesses affected. Consular staff will continue to support British nationals in Russia as well as those in Ukraine, and I take this opportunity to commend our consular staff in those places.

1. [Official Report, 31 March 2022, Vol. 711, c. 8MC.]

Chris Bryant: The Minister said earlier that all these measures come into force immediately. Why on earth does the Government measure allow VTB Bank, the second-largest Russian bank, 30 days for clients to be able to remove their assets? I do not even know what the metaphor is in terms of horses and bolts and having already escaped, but this seems preposterous.

Michael Ellis: I do not think the individuals involved will consider it a weak measure; on the contrary, I think they will consider it a draconian measure, which is exactly what it is.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I want to return to another point and perhaps help the Minister a little bit, because we want to get at the companies, but we also want to get at the individuals—we need to get at both. We have been lax, and I hope he will accept that across this House we think the Government should take more action on individuals. May I suggest that, rather than going through the lengthy legal due diligence that he says is constraining his ability to act against individuals now, he could use the legislation we have on unexplained wealth orders, where the assets of individuals are impounded and it is up to the individuals to prove that they got them legitimately, rather than our waiting to see whether there is a case? Take the assets away and leave it up to the individuals to demonstrate to us that those are legitimate assets with no connection to Putin.

Michael Ellis: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for mentioning unexplained wealth orders, because that is another thing that this Government have done in order to have the desired effect that she mentions.

In response to the hon. Member for Rhondda, the reason for the 30 days is to have a wind-down on certain measures to allow UK businesses to close their affairs. That is its purpose. It does not enable designated persons to move money within that 30-day window; it is designed to help UK businesses, which will of course also suffer as a result of these measures.

In addition to these two statutory instruments, we are further strengthening our sanctions package by bringing in shipping measures, imminently, and a prohibition on financial services relating to foreign reserves exchange and asset management by the Russian central bank. These will be before the House for consideration soon.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine is part of a long-term strategy. If we give ground now, or try to accommodate illegitimate Russian concerns, the Russians' strategy of aggression would not end. We are concerned that they might not stop at Ukraine; instead they might be emboldened. President Putin's focus would simply potentially move on to the next target. That we cannot have. The UK has therefore been at the forefront of the response in terms of financial aid, aviation measures, lethal aid and sanctions, including on SWIFT.

Acting in concert with our allies, our measures will deliver a devastating blow to Russia's economy and military for years to come. Co-ordinating with our partners, our sanctions will reverberate through Putin's regime. We must remain absolutely firm in our response. We must rise to this moment and we must stand with the people of Ukraine. I am determined that we will continue to support them in that choice, and I commend these regulations to the House.

3.31 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank Ministers and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office officials for the pre-briefings they provided on these measures. I understand that in response to our request for briefings for Members across the House—because the Minister will have seen the great deal of interest that there is in the detail—the FCDO will now be providing those on a daily basis. I hope that the Minister can confirm that.

Russia's unjustifiable and unprovoked attack on Ukraine is a heinous crime of aggression, and we stand united in this House in our utter condemnation of President Putin's invasion and in complete solidarity with the people of Ukraine, who are showing extraordinary courage, resilience and sacrifice in resisting this onslaught. The desire for tough action on these matters is robust and united across this House and across this kingdom. In that regard, I do not want to detain the House for too long, but we do have a number of questions to ask the Minister. We are pledged to work with the Government to work at speed to ensure that the House can pass the necessary legislative measures. I think we first got these just before midnight last night and we are obviously debating them now. We will work with the Government on that, but we do have questions to ask and it is important to go through the proper procedures.

We urge the Government to go even faster and further, not least as we see the scenes today with Russian forces encountering courageous Ukrainian defences but the fighting getting bloodier and increasingly indiscriminate. The horrific reports from Kharkiv overnight, the alleged use of cluster munitions and the deaths and injury of civilians are deeply, deeply shocking. I am sure that colleagues will join me in welcoming the decision by the International Criminal Court prosecutor to open urgent investigations into some of the matters we have seen that have shocked the world. Russia must comply with the laws of armed conflict—the very basic principles that attempt to ensure at least some dignity, proportionality and discrimination to protect civilians and others amid the horrors of war. Those responsible must be held to account.

As we debate these regulations in the Chamber today, let us not forget why we are doing so: the dark spectre of a miles-long column of Russian armour that approaches Kyiv, a city of more than 2.5 million people. In recent hours we have heard shocking warnings from the Russians to civilians to avoid certain areas of Kyiv. The risks are huge. We heard in the statement earlier of the hundreds of thousands of refugees who have already fled the country. We must continue to do everything we can to support the humanitarian effort to offer sanctuary in the UK and to assist the situation at Ukraine's borders, including ensuring the full application of all refugee laws and ensuring that there is no discrimination when it comes to human beings seeking to flee to safety. As the humanitarian situation worsens, that is a stark reminder of the urgency of the need to do everything we can to step up the pressure on Putin to end this bloody campaign.

As the Minister pointed out, we have seen the effects that financial sanctions have already begun to have, with the rouble crashing by over 40%, the main borrowing rates up to 20%, and inflation skyrocketing. The Opposition recognise, as I am sure Members across the House do,

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the brave and difficult decisions that many of our allies and partners have taken to make these measures as effective as possible, including cutting Russia out from SWIFT, as we have long called for. I am acutely conscious that the sanctions will inevitably have difficult consequences for ordinary Russians, who did not choose this illegal war pursued by Putin.

In the past few days, we have seen brave acts of protest and criticism. It takes true courage to protest in Russia, as I am sure the Minister agrees. We pay tribute to all the Russians speaking up against the invasion. We must be clear that it is the Russian Government, not the Russian people, whose actions we condemn; it is Putin who is responsible for the economic consequences of these measures.

We will also see economic impacts here in the UK, as the explanatory memorandums to the regulations make clear, but that is no reason not to act robustly, broadly and swiftly. The unity of the UK and our allies is crucial in that endeavour. We welcome the efforts to co-ordinate with our EU, US and European allies and partners, both NATO and non-NATO, and with many countries around the world. We must build the widest possible coalition to oppose this war, but as many hon. Members have pointed out we cannot be the weak link in designation, implementation and enforcement.

The Opposition welcome the fact that the Government are bringing forward these measures. We will approach them in a constructive spirit, but I want to ask some detailed questions. First, as the Minister pointed out, certain measures relate to financial matters and others relate to dual-use materials, military supplies and other critical industry goods such as those for use in aerospace and communications. I hope that the Minister will provide more clarity on the question of immediacy. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) made an incredibly important point about the 30 days; we need to be absolutely clear that there will not be an opportunity for people to move assets or finances out or seek to circumvent the measures in some way.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Government have to go through a legislative process and so on, but does the shadow Minister share my concerns, first, about warning certain individuals that they are on the target list, and secondly about the delay? I am not too sure how we are to make a distinction between British businesses that need to get their money out and those we are actually targeting. While we are getting a headline today, we are also giving a heads-up to the very people we are targeting.

Stephen Doughty: I am sure that the Minister will say that we are not naming individuals to give them advance warning, but the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) is absolutely right to bring up the fear of asset flight, as several hon. Members have done. We have already heard rumours today that a number of people are trying to dispose of assets and move money. I hope that the Government will name and shame the law firms and accountants who are facilitating that; they are the same enablers who have facilitated the illicit finance network and propped up the Putin regime for

far too long in this country. Quite frankly, those law and accountancy firms and others involved should be ashamed of themselves.

Dame Angela Eagle: Does my hon. Friend share my worry and frustration that there has been such a big gap between the Government's rhetoric about economic crime, sanctions and kleptocracy, and what they actually do? Before we can fully support the sanctions suggested, we need reassurance that there is now no gap and that enforcement will be effective. The sanctions have to be effective, or they might as well not exist.

Stephen Doughty: I completely agree about the need for effectiveness. A point has been made today about the slow pace of the designation of some individuals and entities. The Government have rightly talked about moving in lockstep with our allies, particularly in the EU, yet we still seem to be off pace in naming individuals—we seem to be moving more slowly. Some of the individuals that we have mentioned have already been sanctioned by the US and others for years or do not have significant assets in the UK. We need to ensure that our measures are meaningful, immediate, effective, deep and robust, and that individuals are not now sweeping their money and assets out of the UK.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): What I found a bit disappointing about the Minister's speech was its tone. We are all on the same side and trying to help, but there is still a question: why are we lagging behind? Is it that the legislation needs strengthening—I hope the Minister can see that across the House we are willing to work weekends to do that with the Government—or is it something else? He has not adequately explained why we still have not sanctioned individuals who are named by other jurisdictions.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Lady makes an important point. The Minister can be assured of our co-operation in getting these measures through quickly. He has already heard some suggestions for ways in which we might name individuals more quickly; I hope we will hear back from him about them.

We believe that we need to go further to widen financial and banking sectoral measures beyond Sberbank. My second question is about whether the Minister can explain why measures on corresponding banks have not been applied to all Russian financial institutions today, rather than just to Sberbank. Indeed, we understand that the measures have been expanded to include sovereign debt. The Opposition have called for that to apply to UK subsidiaries of entities as well. Will the Minister confirm the position?

Mr Davis: I am going to pose a question for which I seek an actual answer—an unusual thing in this House. The Minister spoke about the problem of speed and co-ordination, and indeed the question of which banks were excluded from this process, which strikes me as a key issue.

These financial measures are like a hand grenade—a weapon that can kill or do damage to both sides: they will undoubtedly do damage to Germany, they will do some damage to us, and so on. We must seek financial weapons that do much more harm to the other side than to us because we may keep this up for years, and if we are to maintain support behind it we need to design

it in that way. The Minister did not answer in those terms when I asked him the question, so I am interested to know whether the Opposition spokesman can.

Stephen Doughty: It will clearly be necessary for us to propose and potentially impose measures for quite some time—for a number of years, according to the explanatory notes—and we have agreed to work with the Government on that. Obviously, as I have said, we hope that they are acting robustly, deeply and broadly now. It is crucial to send a very strong signal, not least given what we have seen. I certainly hope that Russia turns around and ends this illegal invasion, but at the moment we have to send that very strong signal.

Thirdly, there are some exemptions in the legislation, and it is not clear on the surface why they apply. For example, there is an exemption for correspondent clearing services relating to aviation assets. Can the Minister explain the reasoning behind that? There are other exemptions that clearly make sense, relating to humanitarian affairs and extraordinary circumstances, and I can understand why they are there, but can the Minister provide a fuller explanation?

Fourthly, the Government have previously referred to an intention to limit the deposits that can be made by Russian nationals. Do they still intend to introduce such a measure, which is not part of the package that we are discussing today?

Fifthly, we think that there are additional things that the Government could do. For example, the US immediately introduced a ban on all imports from Donbas regions controlled by Russia. Have the Government considered that? We have also proposed a ban on the export of luxury goods, comparable with what has been in place against Syria. If that were undertaken with our partners and allies, it could have a major effect in putting the squeeze on those around Putin who enjoy their luxury lifestyles.

Bob Seely: Does the hon. Gentleman accept, in the context of a wider set of points, that there is a significant argument for doing more in the legal field? Should we do more about protection against the abuse of libel law, abuse relating to the Data Protection Act, and the need for a foreign lobbying Act? The economic crime Bill and this statutory instrument are not the end of a process; they should be the beginning of a process to clean up our society. It is shocking that we have got ourselves into this mess.

Stephen Doughty: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman, especially in connection with the measures relating to SLAPP suits that we debated recently in the House. This is a crucial point. There is a whole infrastructure here, a whole systemic problem. What saddens me is that many of these measures were set out so clearly by, for instance, the Foreign Affairs Committee and in the Russia report, but were not introduced. I hope that the Government will now bring forward measures in all these areas. The measures do not, of course, apply only to Russia; they apply to other regimes that are doing heinous things.

Sixthly, we support wider sectoral measures, to cover insurance and reinsurance, for example, preventing UK firms from underwriting transactions with Russian entities or activity in Russia. I understand that the sanctions we

are discussing today will apply to insurance and reinsurance as it applies to the specific transactions covered by these sanctions, but will the Minister tell us whether the Government are considering a wider prohibition on the provision of insurance and reinsurance services more generally to Russia and those engaging with the regime, not least given the key role that the UK plays in the international insurance market?

Seventhly, we have heard the point rightly made by one of the Minister's own colleagues, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), about Scottish limited partnerships. May we have some urgent answers on that?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) raised a point about the use of assets. My understanding is that these sanctions would, for example, prevent service companies from servicing a large mansion somewhere in London in respect of, say, cleaning or facilities. Of course, the individual would still be able to make use of the asset.

Liam Byrne: My hon. Friend is right. There is a secondary question that the Minister needs to clear up: if a Russian oligarch has a mortgage on a mansion, is the bank that holds the mortgage legally entitled to take debt repayments or not?

Stephen Doughty: My right hon. Friend makes a crucial point. My understanding, which the Minister can clarify if necessary, is that it does apply to financial transactions including mortgages and remortgaging, but we need to understand this because we need to truly freeze the use of these assets and not allow loopholes.

As always, I must ask how these measures will apply to the British overseas territories and Crown dependencies. Will they be effective immediately in those territories or will we, or they, have to pass additional measures? We do not want a lag effect of days in those jurisdictions. I also want to ask about resourcing. I pay tribute to the officials in the FCDO sanctions unit, who are working on these matters at speed, but can I get an assurance from the Minister that their resourcing is being rapidly scaled up so that we can move swiftly, robustly and in a legally sound way? What consideration is being given to alternative routes for naming some of the individuals?

These are highly complex sanctions measures, especially in relation to the dual use of goods, and a major Government effort will be vital to ensure that there is detailed understanding across the private sector so that we can support their implementation, not least given the severe penalties outlined in the instrument and our desire for the measures to be implemented immediately and effectively. Will the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation issue urgent and clear new guidance on these measures? Similarly, will additional resources be provided to the export control joint unit to support compliance and enforcement? If we want the toughest measures, we will also need the toughest enforcement, but unfortunately many of the agencies have been lagging behind the US. They do excellent work, but they have not had the resources they need.

There are multiple reports today that troops from Belarus might have been entering Ukraine. They are unconfirmed at this stage, but we know that attacks

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have been conducted from the territory of Belarus. We have all previously called for wider sanctions against Belarus, and indeed the EU has laid out such sanctions. Will these measures be effective against Belarusian entities and individuals? As has been said, sanctions are important but they alone will not deal with the wider problems of illicit finance and the UK's role as a hub for corrupt, Russia-linked money. This is a matter not just of individuals but of fixing a broken system in which poor governance, weak enforcement and a lack of transparency have allowed the UK to be a haven for ill-gotten gains. We have to take action across the board.

There is a range of additional measures, and the Minister has hinted that we might see measures relating to shipping. Again, we want to understand that these will apply globally, in the light of our overseas territories and Crown dependencies. Can he tell us when he expects additional SIs and designations to be laid? We want to work with him in co-operation, but we need to have that information in order to understand when these things are coming.

Finally, today is St David's day, the national day of my home—Wales. I have previously spoken in this place of the strong historic ties between Ukraine and not only my home city of Cardiff but the whole of Wales. I am hugely proud of the demonstrations of support and solidarity that we have seen across Wales, including in Cardiff, as well as across the UK, and I am delighted to report that the Welsh First Minister has in the last hour announced direct support from Wales of £4 million for humanitarian and medical needs. Wales stands ready to welcome Ukrainians fleeing the conflict, just as we have done for Afghans and so many other people across the globe throughout history. I hope that a strong message goes out from this House and from across the United Kingdom that we will unite to impose the strongest measures and provide the strongest support we can to the Ukrainian people in these dark days.

3.48 pm

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I found much to agree with in the comments from the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), as I did in those of the Minister. Today's moves to prevent Russian banks and businesses from accessing our financial system and to ban key exports to Russia are much-needed and, frankly, long overdue. We should have been doing some of these things—not all of them—some time ago.

Yesterday, the Foreign Secretary said that this legislation would immediately be applied to Sberbank, VEB, Sovcombank and Otkritie. These measures will undoubtedly inflict damage on the Russian economy and punish the Russian state, but we must go further. It may be that I have not completely comprehended the Minister's intentions, but why are we applying this immediate legislation only to those specific banks? The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) made a good point on this. Why not immediately apply it to VTB, Gazprombank or Alfa-Bank—Russia's second, third and fourth biggest banks? I note that the Americans have sanctioned the same banks in the same way, and I assume that this is to protect the operation of fundamental European infrastructure such as oil and gas.

That was the point I was trying to draw from the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth when I asked whether he thought we were trying to ensure we did the maximum damage to Russia but the minimum damage to our allies if we had to maintain this for a long time. I am interested to hear the Minister's answer, because by excluding those banks in the immediate term, we will to some extent undermine our strategy. Time is against us and troops are bearing down on Kyiv as we speak. The longer we wait, the longer Ukraine and her people will be subject to indiscriminate missile strikes and the terror of Putin's forces.

Similarly, I would like to hear what the Government are doing to stop these measures being bypassed by Russia's erstwhile friends, allies and fellow travellers: China, India and Brazil. Again, if we allow 30 days and those countries are willing to facilitate it, Russia could bypass a very large component of what we are trying to do. There might be rouble-support operations by China, for example. How would we cope with that? If we do not succeed in this strategy, frankly, we risk Ukraine being turned into a European Vietnam, a prospect too horrible to countenance.

As damaging as today's measures are to the Russian financial system, they will not hit Putin where it hurts most. For that we need to target many more of his allies and facilitators who have bought their way into British society. That is what is missing from these statutory instruments.

We need to target those who own businesses on our stock exchange. We need to target those who own London homes that we can no longer afford because of Russian operations in London. We need to target oligarchs who own football clubs that many of our citizens can no longer afford to attend because they are so expensive. For too long, we turned a blind eye to dirty money flooding into the City of London. The right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), my successor as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, has a very strong record on this, and she will know that we have failed to use the tools we already have.

For example, we have had unexplained wealth orders at our disposal since 2017. In theory, they force a suspect to reveal the source of their wealth, and failure to do so results in the property under consideration being seized. Since 2017, only nine of those orders have been presented against four people, and only two of them succeeded.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I am very much enjoying the right hon. Gentleman's contribution, and I thank him for what he said. Does he agree that, until we target the enablers—the accountants, lawyers and banks—supporting individuals or companies in laundering dirty money, we will not hit the heart of the dirty money industry that we are trying to attack with this legislation?

Mr Davis: The right hon. Lady makes a point that will be made by my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) and others, and I have a lot of sympathy, but we have to be careful that we do not take away ordinary citizens' rights—indeed, the proper rights of any individual—in how we deal with the lawyers, the accountants and so on.

Particularly in the lawfare area, a huge industry of enormous margins and enormous profits has been developed by various law firms, in particular, that have developed the tactics for defeating the Government's imposition of proper laws.

Bob Seely: My right hon. Friend and the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) raise a very important point. CMS took instruction from a Ministry of the Interior official who was actually a front for organised crime in the Magnitsky case. Should organised crime have legal representation? Yes. Should foreign organised crime have legal representation? Potentially. Does foreign organised crime have the right to hire companies such as CMS to try to use lawfare to attack freedom of speech and Bill Browder in this country? I would argue not, and that is the debate we should be having.

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend and I sponsored the lawfare debate four weeks ago, and he played a sterling part—he made probably the most informative speech in the whole debate. Yes, we have to address lawfare, but it is a difficult area. There are quicker areas we can work on right now, bearing in mind that time means lives. We have to work faster than we have been.

As I said, the NCA was able to bring successfully only two unexplained wealth orders out of nine, but the truth is that it has 100 targets sitting in its files—not two or four—and it cannot pursue them. Its evidence was given to the Intelligence and Security Committee and is reflected in the Russia report, but Lynne Owens, who was then head of the NCA, said that it simply could not afford the huge legal bills that it faced. The truth is that frankly it does not have the huge calibre of skills—no agency can say that they have—that oligarchs with virtually infinite quantities of money can employ.

How can we get the Serious Fraud Office, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the Financial Conduct Authority, the Crown Prosecution Service and the NCA all to use this legislation properly? First, we must ensure that the costs of unexplained wealth orders are brought under control from the state point of view. Again, we must be careful that we do not undermine the rights of ordinary citizens, so we may say that the rules will apply only to unexplained wealth orders of, let us say, more than £50 million or something like that—that will not worry the ordinary citizen—and put a cap on expenditure. We must also use the private sector. We must say, “This is a national emergency” and ask everybody to put their shoulder to the wheel and make these UWOs work properly. The NCA has a list of 100, but those of us who took part in the lawfare debate know that roughly 140 Russian oligarchs should be on the target list. Not all of them are in Britain, but they should be on the list because their money may be in Britain, even if that is not the case.

It seems to me that there is a serious issue that should be in today's regulations. I worry about the Government moving so slowly that their prey escape them and that the people who are in effect the enemies of the people of Ukraine by proxy get away with things that we should not allow. We must fight fire with fire and beat the oligarchs at their own game.

I will pick one oligarch out. We have already seen the results of actions taken so far, with oligarchs scrambling to protect their reputations. In the newspapers in the

last few days we have seen Roman Abramovich doing things to protect himself. According to the Spanish Intelligence Committee, he is the man—or at least one of the men—who manages Putin's business affairs. That is a really important issue in considering whether he should be on our target list. He was refused a Swiss residency permit due to suspected involvement in money laundering and contacts with criminal organisations and, when his UK visa was up for renewal, he chose to withdraw his application as it became clear that he would need to explain the source of his wealth due to the changes that we introduced in 2015. I picked one, but I could have picked any of 100-plus to illustrate that there is information and knowledge—it is not a question of being unable to identify the individuals. It should not have taken a war for us to make a start on that.

Liam Byrne: The right hon. Gentleman is making a brilliant speech. Will he give the House his perspective on the potential weakness in the sanctions regime? Its focus is obviously on asset freezing, but while Abramovich, who is widely regarded as Putin's cashier, has tried to take pre-emptive measures by transferring control of Chelsea football club to a charitable trust, there is a real issue that the mansions, the jets and the yachts owned by oligarchs will continue to be available for their use because the regulations do not prohibit the use of economic resources for personal consumption.

Mr Davis: That is true. We must also face facts on the sophistication of the targets that we are aiming at. The assets that the right hon. Member talked about—the blocks of flats, the grand houses and the yachts—are probably owned by six or seven layers of companies through various offshore entities in the Cayman Islands, the British Virgin Islands or whatever, and it is incredibly difficult for the state to find out who the owner is. That is why these unexplained wealth orders are at least the first weapon that we should sharpen up. That is also why speed is important.

Every day we give to these people allows their advisers to develop more sophisticated tactics of concealment and distraction. In at least a couple of the unexplained wealth orders, it turned out that the state was pursuing the wrong ownership because of distraction tactics. Speed, determination, sophistication and clear targeting, which is not difficult given what I have just been saying, are critical to succeeding in this. It should not have taken a war for us to start rooting out dirty Russian money in the UK, but we are where we are and we must not wait any longer.

We must start by going after the 140 or so oligarchs who have been identified as having direct links with Putin. We must take that action immediately and make clear to those corrupt oligarchs that their money is no longer welcome on these shores, and indeed that it is unsafe while they continue to provide financial support to Putin, whatever they say in the public press. I would have liked that process to have started today with these SIs. Sadly it has not, but hopefully it will be in next week's economic crime Bill. However, if that takes weeks as well, every single week means more lives lost, more opportunities for these people to escape justice, and a worsening of the chances of our rescuing the Ukrainian nation from the fate in front of it.

4.1 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): Let me start on a note of consensus. The Scottish National party supports these statutory instruments. We have already expressed that support, and called for many of the measures that have been included. Although I am instinctively uncomfortable with any Government—I include the Scottish Government in that—having this degree of power with an unlimited timescale, I think needs must and we should not pretend there is division where there is none. We support these measures.

I propose to offer a general critique of the UK's more general approach, and then some ideas for future work on sanctions. As other Members have said, I am concerned that the UK's general approach is reinventing the wheel and duplicating effort, particularly on naming individuals who are subject to sanction. The EU response in scale, scope and ambition—I am talking particularly about the civil protection mechanism, the European Peace Facility and the general response to the asylum situation—simply dwarfs the UK's efforts in every possible way, and I would like the UK to co-ordinate far more closely with the EU's efforts than it has done.

The EU has named a lot more individuals, on a different legal basis—I am a solicitor by trade, and appreciate that this needs to be done properly—and there is surely an opportunity for greater complementarity between the UK's efforts and those of the EU on this. I would include sanctions due diligence in that, and I would like a reassurance that those talks are under way and that efforts are being co-ordinated. There is surely scope for doing this faster. This point has already been made, but effectively giving people three weeks' notice that they are going to be sanctioned is surely the worst possible way to do it. We need to do this faster and better, and the EU can offer some assistance with that.

I appreciate that this point on refugees is outwith the scope of the SIs, but it is a point worth making, particularly after the lamentable statement that we heard from the Home Secretary earlier. All 27 states of the EU have granted all Ukrainian nationals a three-year visa waiver. They are not guddling about developing a new complicated scheme with new paperwork, rules and restrictions. They have said, "If you are in trouble and you need to get out, come on over and we will sort out the paperwork later." That is the approach the UK Government should be taking. That would be clear, easy to understand, ambitious and it would be kind. I suspect that it would also be a damn sight more workable than the effort the Home Office has come up with to date, which I fear will not be sufficient for the needs ahead.

The UK needs to waive visas not wave flags—I have made that point before, and I will continue to make it until the UK Government take this seriously. We have not seen anything like the ambition that we need. Even William Hague in *The Times* today praised the EU's decision on this issue, and criticised the UK Government. In an opinion poll yesterday, 77% of the UK population who responded to the survey were in favour of Ukrainians coming here without visas, and only 12% opposed that. The UK Government are out of step with the people of the UK on this, and I urge a change of heart.

That said, I have something of a shopping list on future sanctions activity. I am conscious that some of this is in train, some of it is not, and some of it is in

places that we are not quite sure where they are. In no particular order—all of this needs to be done concurrently—we want to see an increased speed in sanctioning particularly Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and other military chiefs, as the EU has done. We want to see seizure of sanctioned individuals and companies' UK real estate and assets. If people are to be sanctioned, they need to lose the use of their assets, not just suffer greater inconvenience.

I would like to hear a response from the Minister on extending the full sanctions package. For maximum deterrence impact, it needs to cover the overseas dependencies and territories—the British Virgin Islands in particular. I would be grateful for a reassurance beyond what I have seen in the statutory instruments that the overseas dependencies will be brought into those efforts, because I think that they are very important loopholes.

We need sanctions to be imposed on all the companies that Mr Putin or his family members are the owner or board member of, listed on the London Stock Exchange. That information should be publicly available, and it should be easily enough done. We want sanctions to be imposed on the family members of the oligarchs targeted, not just the oligarchs themselves. Often family members are used to hide or obscure where wealth actually is. When I was in Kyiv with colleagues a few weeks back, that was mentioned as a particularly effective way for pressure to be brought. We want to see all Russian banks removed from the SWIFT payment system, not just the ones that have been mentioned. I appreciate the work that has been done, but it needs to go further. We would also like to see greater effort and focus on Belarus and President Lukashenko particularly, and his family members.

We would like to see equivalent sanctions imposed on the Belarusian economy as have been on Russia, because they are a joint enterprise. Belarus is a client state of the Kremlin, and has demonstrated that it is every bit as culpable in this as Russia itself. We want to see sanctions on all oil, gas and extracted mineral imports to the UK, including delisting Rosneft from the London Stock Exchange. We want to ban payments from UK customers and registered companies to Gazprom in particular and other state-owned energy corporations. We want to see the sanctions imposed remain in place—this is the point that I made earlier about the time limit on them—until every centimetre of Ukrainian territory is back in Ukrainian hands. This needs to be a long-term commitment, as has been said by others, that cannot just be allowed to wither within a few months.

We want to trace all the connections between Russian companies and banks and Russian military-industrial companies. We want to see their assets frozen and to prohibit all transactions. As was said in last week's emergency debate, the actions of the Kremlin in Ukraine are supported by not just a state apparatus but a deeply shadowy, complex, black-grey-opaque network of criminality around the world. It will take an international effort to track it down and unpack it, but we want to see efforts towards that. I would be grateful for an assurance that that is under way in a concrete sense, because it will be a long-term effort. We would also like to see work with other countries to eliminate the loopholes of sanctions policies. Again, it has been mentioned before that there are countries that may well work to undermine the

sanctions. They need to be called out, and be aware that they cannot be allowed to be on the wrong side of history.

Finally, I would like to hear more about financial support for UK companies and individuals who will be impacted by this. UK individuals and companies that, through no fault of their own, have been conducting legal trade with Russian entities will suffer financial hardship because of this. It is right that if the state is banning that activity, and I certainly think that we should, there should be at least some financial consideration of the domestic impact of that on our companies and individuals.

We support the measures. We want to see more of them. We want to see more ambition, more connection to the EU's efforts, more scale and, above all else, more speed. The Minister has an almost unique opportunity, given the cross-party unity in the House on this. I urge him to not let that moment pass. If we need to do something differently, we can do it differently. There is a willingness across the House to act. I hope that he rises to this occasion.

4.9 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): It was Lenin who said that there are some decades when nothing happens and weeks in which decades happen. It feels as if this week is one of those weeks. This war, as we know, is pernicious and wrong, and the Government are straining every sinew to ensure that it is not successful; indeed, the whole House is united on that front. These sanctions—I do not think this has been fully recognised by all quarters of the House—are the most extensive that have ever been put in place by any Government at any time. Think back to the days of apartheid South Africa. Think back to all sorts of regimes we have seen over recent decades. Never have a Government acted this extensively, indeed this swiftly. For that, the Government should be commended.

I have a couple of questions on the financial sanctions for those on the Treasury Bench. First, what is the position of individuals or institutions who may be assisting those trying to evade sanctions, either now or when these measures have come into force? For the avoidance of doubt, will the Minister clarify that it remains legal for UK entities or individuals to hold equities or debt instruments in businesses headquartered in Russia that were already held before the crisis started? It is important to get that clarification on the record.

On export sanctions, what safeguards are there? The Government are trying to prohibit the export of certain materiel to Russia that will help in the war effort against Ukraine, which we all condemn and we all deplore. What safeguards are there in the legislation for exports to third countries that are then smuggled to Russia, because that is a very obvious route that many nefarious individuals may take? Will the Minister also enlighten the House on what other types of equipment might be considered for inclusion within this export ban that are currently not included? What sorts of things are the Government also looking at?

These sanctions represent the right way forward. We are isolating Putin and we are squeezing the Russian economy in concert with our allies. It is worth noting—I agree with the words of my right hon. Friend the Prime

Minister—that we are not taking military action directly. We are not doing that. The right way for a country like the United Kingdom and the world is not to try to escalate the military conflict, but to squeeze Putin, his Government and the Russian economy.

If I may, I will finish with a word about the City of London. There has been some discussion on both sides of the House and from former Chairs of the Public Accounts Committee, of which I am a very proud former member, about the City of London, and dirty money and cleaning it up. I speak as somebody—I should probably declare an interest—who was a corporate lawyer and a banker in the City of London. The City of London does many brilliant things, but I think we all recognise that it now needs to step up and help this House and the Government to show that might is not always right, and that morals and money are not always mutually exclusive.

I strongly support the imposition of these sanctions.

4.12 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I am delighted by the tone of the debate, because on the Back Benches there is complete agreement. I hope the Minister will leave the debate emboldened by some of the ideas we put to him, so he can take them and translate them into action. I very much support the introduction of the two statutory instruments. I will speak specifically to paragraph (3) of statutory instrument No. 194 on the extension of powers to designate persons.

Before I come on to the detail, if I may, I would like to say two things. The Minister said that he wants to protect British companies and so do I, but there are a lot of British companies that are actually owned by Putin and Putin's cronies. One of the problems we have is that it is so easy to establish a company here in the UK. Not only is it cheap—it is £12 and we do not mind that—but there is so little regulatory control of the data and so few powers for Companies House to verify that data and raise red flags where there are questions, that it is no good the Minister saying he wants to protect British companies. In so doing, he may often be protecting dirty money. That is why we were all so frustrated yesterday that the only move going ahead in relation to Companies House is yet another White Paper and yet another consultation. It really is time to act on that issue.

Across the House, we are all saying that the powers are there. The problem is that there does not seem to be an effective mechanism in Government to implement the powers and sanctions that we have. This is partly about resources—we have all talked about that—but I think it is also about political will, and the Government are trying to face both ways in relation to the City of London. There is a fear of undermining the financial services sector, which I understand, but in having that fear they are reluctant to take action where they should to eliminate dirty money. We will never have sustainable growth and sustainable prosperity on the back of dirty money, so it is a short-sighted policy. Having the political will, as well as the resources, is very important.

The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) mentioned a list of 35 names, which I am familiar with—Navalny put it on Facebook just before he was imprisoned some time ago. I simply draw to the Minister's attention, as others have, that 15 people on that list have already been sanctioned by the EU and

[*Dame Margaret Hodge*]

the USA. Why on earth have they not been sanctioned here? What is stopping that happening? Until the strong words enunciated by the Government are enacted, we will not have confidence that our British Government are really doing all that they can to support Ukraine and the Ukrainians in their fight for democracy.

Sammy Wilson: Did the right hon. Lady find the excuse that was given during the statement yesterday—that the Government have to gather the information on these individuals—rather limp? Surely if other Administrations already have sufficient information to do this, that must also be available to our Government.

Dame Margaret Hodge: That is indeed the case. It has been suggested that we could use parliamentary privilege to sanction those individuals through the House, or there is my suggestion that we use the powers under the unexplained wealth orders whereby the assets are removed and it is then up to the individual to justify the legitimacy of their access to those assets.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in many cases, it is not as though these assets are very mobile? They are expensive houses and apartments and other fixed assets. They are easily identifiable and could be sanctioned clearly, as Italy, France and others have done.

Dame Margaret Hodge: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why the Government should readily undertake that action, and I would add to that list that places in English public schools can be identified and halted very quickly.

I have been handed a list today of 105 oligarchs. I think that these names are not on the list that the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon mentioned. These are wealthy businesspeople who are involved in companies of strategic importance to the Russian economy, in such things as energy, metals, chemicals, pharmaceuticals and construction. The list is of men—they are all men, I think—who have made a lot of money by robbing assets from the Russian people. That is where the money has come from and they have made their money only because they are close to the Kremlin, and they sustain their wealth only because they remain close to the Kremlin.

You will be delighted to hear that I will not read out the whole list, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I know that you think I go on a bit too long—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Never.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I will not read the list of more than 100 names, but I have picked out 10 that demonstrate not only the importance of tackling individuals, but their links to the UK. So we are complicit in this and we are facilitating it by not tackling this.

Alexander Abramov—my apologies if I mispronounce names—is the co-owner and chair of a multinational company registered and headquartered here in London, Evraz, which is a metals company. Together with his partners Roman Abramovich and Alexander Frolov, he

owns a nearly 25% stake in TransContainer, which is the largest Russian container railway operator. His wealth is estimated at \$6 billion.

Andrey Guryev is the majority owner and deputy chairman of PhosAgro, which is one of the world's largest producers of fertilizers. It might well have been involved in the disaster in Lebanon—I am not alleging that, but the explosion in Lebanon arose from fertilizer that came through Russia. He has given 20% of the company to Putin's university professor Vladimir Litvinenko, who is thought to be a proxy for Putin. He owns Witanhurst palace in London, which is valued at about £450 million, and his joint wealth with his family is estimated at \$5.5 billion.

Leonid Mikhelson is the founder and chairman of natural gas producer Novatek, which is also listed on the London stock exchange. In 2017, he bought a 17% stake in petrochemical company Sibur from Putin's reported former son-in-law, increasing his stake to 48%. His partner is Gennady Timchenko, a billionaire who is also a close friend of President Putin and whom the UK has also sanctioned. His wealth is estimated at \$21 billion.

Mikhail Fridman has already been sanctioned by the EU. Fridman controls Alfa Group and LetterOne, both headquartered in Luxembourg. Fridman was investigated by the Spanish National Court between 2019 and 2021 for his role in the Zed bankruptcy. He owns £90 million of property and permanently resides in London. His worth is estimated to be \$13 billion.

Vladimir Lisin is majority shareholder and chairman of NLMK Group, a leading manufacturer of steel products and responsible for one fifth of Russian steel production. NLMK is listed on the London stock exchange. Lisin also owns the railway operator First Cargo, as well as some ports and shipping companies. His estimated worth is \$24 billion.

Petr Aven has been sanctioned by the EU. He is head of the largest Russian private bank, Alfa Bank. With his partners German Khan, Alexei Kuzmichev and Mikhail Fridman, Aven co-owns Alfa Group and LetterOne, both headquartered in Luxembourg. He is tipped to be the group's direct link to Putin from his days as the Russian Minister of Foreign Economic Relations. He owns a mansion in Surrey and is a renowned art collector. His worth is estimated at \$5 billion.

Suleiman Kerimov was sanctioned by the US in 2018. He gets most of his fortune from his 76% stake in Russia's biggest gold producer, Polyus. He profited from co-investing in Russian shares together with the then First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov, who was responsible for the Russian economy. The FinCEN files show that Kerimov paid £6 million to the Chernukhin family, who have been well exposed in the UK press. Kerimov's family is worth some \$10 billion.

Vladimir Potanin acquired a stake in Norilsk Nickel during Russia's privatisation in 1995. Today, he owns just over a third of Russia's largest nickel and palladium producer. Norilsk Nickel is also listed on the London stock exchange. Potanin also owns a pharmaceutical company, Petrovax Pharm, and a ski resort, Rosa Khutor, near Sochi. His worth is nearly \$26 billion.

Yelena Baturina—sorry, she is a woman; Russia's wealthiest, apparently—is the widow of Yuri Luzhkov, who was the mayor of Moscow from 1992 to 2010. During her husband's time as mayor, Baturina owned

the construction company Inteko and cement factories, which benefited from the city's commissions. She was the previous owner of the British property Witanhurst.

Finally—I have only chosen 10 out of the list—we have Vladimir Yakunin. He is an ex-KGB colleague of Putin. He ran state-owned monopoly Russian Railways between 2005 and 2015. He and his family extracted nearly \$4 billion in assets and commissions from Russian Railways, in Navalny's estimates. Most of those assets are now administered by his London-based son via a Luxembourg-registered investment fund. Yakunin is the founder and president of the Putin-linked World Public Forum "Dialogue of Civilisations". We do not know, because we do not have a public register of ownership, but we think he owns two north London properties. I will undertake to send the Minister the complete list, from which I have raised only 10 examples.

Mr David Davis: My right hon. Friend, if I may call her that, will be able to work out, as a former Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, that 35 plus 105 comes to 140, which is the number I was using before. These are the people I was thinking of. The reason I say that is that although Vladimir Putin theoretically has no assets, in practice he is estimated to have something like \$200 billion, and that \$200 billion will be being held by the 140 people we have talked about. In targeting them, we are targeting him directly, and that is the incentivisation we are aiming at in this exercise.

Dame Margaret Hodge: Hear, hear. We all agree. I will send the complete list to the Minister. I ask him and his colleagues in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and elsewhere to forensically examine the circumstances of the people on that list and to come back to us all, so that we have confidence that the Government are enacting what they say they want to do and taking real firm action against those cronies of Putin who are propping him up and allowing him to create havoc in Europe.

4.27 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge). I will talk a little about enablers, but it might be helpful to talk a little about oligarchs as well, and I will try, just from my own experiences, having lived in Ukraine and having tried to keep abreast of what was happening in the Soviet Union when I lived there and since, to talk also about the role of oligarchs in Russian hybrid war. I will talk a little about the statutory instruments and give them some context, if that will be helpful.

I think it is pretty depressing that it has taken a major war in Europe for us to take economic crime seriously. We have been waiting on this Bill since 2018, and there is no excuse why it has not been on the statute book for 20 years, frankly. Previous Conservative Governments have failed—I am delighted that this Government are doing the right thing; I am not criticising this one—previous coalition Governments have failed and, frankly, previous Labour Governments have failed. I just do not understand how we have got ourselves into the mess we are in now.

Obviously I am going to support these regulations, the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill and whatever else the Government put up, but I stress to them that this is the beginning of a cleaning up

of our legal system and finance system—this is not an end, but a start. We do not know how much money has flowed through our country using offshore accounts or Companies House. Our banks were not responsible for this corrupt flow of wealth—some of the worst in history. It was the Danish, German and Swedish banks that were responsible for that, but it is UK companies that they used.

I also say to the Minister that, as well as the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill, we need a foreign lobbying Bill and amendments to libel law and data protection law. We need to do more on SLAPPs—strategic lawsuits against public participation—where aggressive lawyers seek to intimidate campaigning groups, journalists and the like. We also need an espionage Bill.

We must toughen up the Solicitors Regulation Authority. I am told by whistleblowers working for the big companies that they do not do proper client checks and that "know your client" checks are non-existent for some of them. Some actually have a list of people that they specifically do not do those checks on because they know that they are inherently corrupt and inherently criminal. What on earth has happened to some of the major legal firms in this country that means that they specifically avoid "know your client" checks because they know that they will have to turn that client down if they do because those clients are corrupt, criminal or linked to organised crime? I am afraid to say that that is pretty shocking.

I note that some oligarchs are now distancing themselves from President Putin. Fridman, Deripaska and Abramovich have all come out with rather woolly statements in the last couple of days. I am sorry, but I don't buy it.

Layla Moran: Does the hon. Gentleman not find that it rather sticks in the throat that Mr Abramovich has been going around saying that he is an envoy of peace and claiming that he is somehow brokering peace between Ukraine and Russia, given his former involvement in the matter?

Bob Seely: The hon. Lady brings me to a point about how oligarchs work. To go back to Ukraine, somebody such as Dmitry Firtash, who is now wanted by the Americans, was set up by Gazprom and Putin. He was given sweetheart deals to import vast amounts of cheap energy into Ukraine. The vast profits that he garnered from those sweetheart deals gave him a good life but, more importantly, he funnelled that money into buying up chunks of east Ukrainian industry, effectively as a front for the FSB, the former KGB. Critically, he also used it to purchase politicians and to fund the pro-Russian political parties in eastern Ukraine.

When it comes to oligarchs, therefore, it is important to understand that we are talking about an economic model within hybrid war. Of all the tools of hybrid war, if hon. Members read the Russian characteristics of war, they will see that the first characteristic of the Russian military doctrine is that there is an integrated military and non-military strategy. So they have their troops, paramilitaries, front organisations or assassins, but with that they have the politics, economics, culture, religion and even sport—sport matters very much.

When it comes to oligarchs, we are talking about not just obscenely rich people who are mates with somebody, but a structure of control and power, whether that is in eastern Ukraine or in the United Kingdom, primarily

[*Bob Seely*]

to facilitate vast money flows to tax havens or to intimidate and silence the western media into not reporting on those people. There are a series of outcomes to that, so I thank the hon. Lady for the intervention.

I return to Abramovich, Fridman and Deripaska. If they were so keen to smarten up their act—they are clearly scared of what might happen—I would like to know why, as of only a few weeks ago, they and their London lawyers were all abusing data protection Acts or libel law to target and intimidate individuals, such as Chris Steele and Catherine Belton, HarperCollins and others. At the end of last year and even this year, they have continued to intimidate a free press. They were enabled, and I make the point that it is not only the oligarchs but their millionaire servant class of enablers who enable the billionaire class of oligarchs who enable the neo-fascism that we see in Europe.

Mr Kevan Jones: I commend the hon. Gentleman for his speech today, his past work in the area and his knowledge of it. Is the issue not also close to home in his party? A co-chair of the Conservative party has a business with, as I understand it, an office in Moscow with 50 people in it whose job has been to facilitate those oligarchs and others and to use their money around the world for expensive travel and other things. Should people such as him not question what they have done to support Putin and his regime?

Bob Seely: The right hon. Gentleman makes a really good point. I do not have anything against Ben Elliot; he is a decent enough character. Do I think it is great that Hawthorn does PR for oligarchs? No, I really do not. Do I think it is great that there are Members of the House of Lords, whom we are not allowed to name—God knows why—who have set up their strategic advice so we know nothing about their clients, or who advise Russian oligarchs and their companies? No.

Do I think it is great that we have had a former member of the Scott Trust, Geraldine Proudler, who has represented the organised crime interest that killed Magnitsky? No, I do not. Do I think that there are advisers to the current Leader of the Opposition who have very questionable records when it comes to advice to oligarchs? No, I do not. Do I defend any Tories in that space as well? No, I do not.

What worries me is that, as well as having a very obvious commitment to not hurting the City of London—putting our national interests ahead of the City of London would be awful: it would never do—we build up a quiet collection of very powerful individuals who then effectively gently corrupt our system. I am sure they may be acting in the best interests, but, collectively, they have to be careful.

I think it was in the 1930s that Michael Foot wrote “Guilty Men”. In the past 10 years there have been guilty men and women who have done a really bad job of facilitating the agents of fascism, and those people are going to start coming out of the woodwork. It would be better for many of those people to consider their positions now, rather than becoming the targets for the media and people such as ourselves.

Mr David Davis: This is not my main point, but I just point out that it is not just Britain; after all, the chairman of Gazprom and the former German Chancellor is another such example.

The point that I want to bring my hon. Friend to is his question about the lawyers. I do not feel that I responded properly to his intervention about the professions involved here. It seems to me that professional bodies themselves have to look very hard at the issue. We also have to make sure that the law is enforced. What he is talking about—people ignoring the origin of the money being paid to them—is actually a breach of the law that those people understand.

Bob Seely: I do not want to abuse privilege, but, to put it bluntly, I have been told of law firms that do not carry out client checks. I have been told of law firms that are effectively complicit in breaking the law. I have been told of law firms that are knowingly taking from organised crime, but doing it through a front. I will not start naming names now, but people are coming to me and telling me about this stuff—they are telling others here as well. It is a very serious that our legal systems have become so corrupted.

When it comes to solicitors, certainly in the Belton case, there is John Kelly at Harbottle and Lewis; Geraldine Proudler at CMS; Nigel Tait at Carter-Ruck—how often should that company have been mispronounced—which represents the interests of Rosneft; and Hugh Tomlinson QC, who represented all of them. Tait is also going after Charlotte Leslie for another client, as I think some here have mentioned. We have to wonder about the reputations that these people will end up with in a few years’ time, even if they are behaving as well as they might—I am being careful in what I say. Perhaps they are really lovely people, but perhaps their amorality will really begin to bite their reputations in a way that will be uncomfortable.

I just wonder: how on earth have we allowed this to happen? I would love an answer from a lawyer in Government. A free press should be intimidating kleptocrats and criminals. Why have we got to this position in our society—a free society, the mother of Parliaments—where we have kleptocrats, criminals and oligarchs intimidating a free media? We have a coalition not of the willing, but of the woeful. Oligarchs, Putin’s henchmen, team up with amoral lawyers—we know the oligarch model. We heard that from my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) and the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne). Just a few weeks ago, they told us how these firms set up a one-stop corruption shop to offer a form of legalised intimidation to silence not only their rivals, but journalists and authors.

There is also an unstructured, unregulated private eye business that is now collecting kompromat on people in this country. Do not get me wrong: people have the right to advice and legal representation, but that is being abused very badly in our society at the moment. To make the link with Putin, when it comes to the Belton case Catherine Belton says that the legal cases against her started two months after the Navalny video of Putin’s palace, when Navalny quoted from her book. As if by magic, a few weeks later three oligarchs, completely coincidentally, attack her to try to silence her and try to bankrupt HarperCollins and intimidate it into withdrawing the book.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Gentleman is outlining a damning case against those who facilitate. Does he accept that as long as we have a system in the United Kingdom where, as has been described in this House today, those with bottomless pockets and billions of pounds can use them to defend their ill-gotten gains, it will be a one-sided battle when it comes to the more limited resources of those seeking to expose them?

Bob Seely: I completely agree, and the right hon. Gentleman is completely right. I am going to carry on for no more than a minute or 90 seconds, Mr Deputy Speaker. One of the most frightening things that I have read about our society was in the Intelligence and Security Committee report. In that, the head of the National Crime Agency said that it has to think carefully about which cases it can take on, because it is so costly and risky to take on some of the most powerful and, frankly, wretched people, who are lawyered up with these amoral lawyers who seemingly do not care. They have no moral concept of what they are doing but are happy to take the vast sums that these people are willing to pay to scupper the legal processes in this country, prevent the people's will from being done via Government and prevent justice from being done. There are beginning to be elements of state capture, in extreme cases, in some of the things that are happening.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is also alarming when companies such as Eurasian Natural Resources Corporation can take individuals who work for organisations such as the Serious Fraud Office to court for having the audacity to lead an investigation into ENRC, and use SLAPP orders and litigation to weigh down not only the SFO, but the individuals who work for it? Surely we need to offer them our protection.

Bob Seely: We absolutely should, and the hon. Gentleman makes another really important point. The lawyers go after anything and everybody they can to try to destroy them in any way they can. One of the most awful things I read was that Mishcon de Reya was in the process of financially destroying that Maltese journalist Galizia before she was physically destroyed. How awful is that? How much reputational damage are these people willing to endure for the bonuses they make? We are not talking about these people as individuals or as companies enough. We need to do that more.

Neale Hanvey: I have been listening intently to what the hon. Gentleman has said, but surely there must be some remedy and solution. I would be very interested in his view on what practical steps we can take collectively to shut down these loopholes and stop these sharp practices.

Bob Seely: There are lots of them; there are too many for me to go into, because I am genuinely trying to wind up my speech, Mr Deputy Speaker. The best way of doing that is to use privilege to get these oligarch names out on the Floor of the House, so that we do not have to worry about being sued for what we say about them and so we can get the sanctions out, rather than have them cart their money off to God knows where. We can cap costs in NCA cases. We also have to get the crime agencies talking much more holistically.

To round up, I seek a public inquiry into what has gone wrong in the past 10 to 15 years, because this system is becoming rotten at so many levels. I am talking about the amount of money; the corruption to some of the standards in the legal firms; and some of the former politicians—on the Opposition side and ours—who are, in effect, the public spokesmen for these people. It is wrong and there is progress to be made. I support these measures but they should be a start, not an end.

4.43 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Like everyone who has spoken in this debate, I support these regulations, but I want the Paymaster General to become a paymaster for taking on Kremlin paymasters with a lot more force and power behind him. We are now about to see what could be the “Syrianisation” of the conflict in Ukraine. We have seen horrifying pictures of the shelling intensifying this afternoon. We know there are Spetsnaz and paratroopers ready to drop. We know Ramzan Kadyrov has readied thousands of Chechen fighters to go in and pursue a murderous, barbarous campaign. We are on the brink now of a humanitarian disaster in Ukraine. Therefore, what we needed to see from the Government this afternoon was a step change in a plan for economic warfare, targeted to defeat President Putin.

I said to the House yesterday that we remain troubled that our neighbours are so much further ahead in targeting and sanctioning institutions and individuals. The Foreign Secretary, who is not in her place, said something very strange in response: she said that “this is not a competition”.—[*Official Report*, 28 February 2022; Vol. 709, c. 726.]

Of course it is not a competition; it is an exercise in not leaving a gap through which bad people escape justice and our campaign.

The ban on trading in state bonds is in place in Europe, but not here in the United Kingdom. The ban on import and export from breakaway regions is in place in Europe, but not here in the United Kingdom. The sanctions on state Duma members are in place in Europe, but not here in the United Kingdom. There are 23 serious players on the EU sanction list who are not on the UK list. They are key economic players, such as Mr Kostin, the president and chairman of VTB Bank.

Missing from our list are key political figures such as Anton Vaino, chief of staff to President Putin. Missing is Mr Grigorenko, the deputy Prime Minister. Missing are key propagandists such as Margarita Simonyan. Missing, surprisingly, are military figures such as the commander-in-chief of the Black sea fleet, the commander-in-chief of Russian aerospace forces, the commander-in-chief of the Russian army and the Russian Defence Minister. I am well aware that the sanctioning business is not a competition, but I want to know from the Paymaster General why these individuals who are being sanctioned by our neighbours are not in the regulations presented to this House.

Bob Seely: I try to agree on this issue with almost everything the right hon. Gentleman says, but I would put an alternative argument to that point, and I am sorry to do so. People such as Gerasimov are potentially valuable because they are soldiers and can see some of the craziness of what the politicians are doing. The Black sea fleet is potentially a good target, but I would

[Bob Seely]

caution against going after senior military men, provided that they are seen to be credible military men. I apologise for disagreeing.

Liam Byrne: I am grateful for the nuance the hon. Gentleman brings to the debate. Gerasimov was not on the list I cited and I do not believe he is on the EU list either, but what disturbs me, which I have not yet heard an explanation for, is why these individuals are sanctioned across the channel and not yet sanctioned here. That deserves an explanation.

My second point is to push the Paymaster General on just what sanctioning means. We have heard a lot of rhetoric over the past week about the biggest and boldest sanctioning regime in living history, going further and faster against the Russians than ever before. Frankly, that does not say much, given the lassitude with which the Government have approached this question over the past few years.

I am seriously concerned that, whereas France is talking about taking away assets such as mansions, yachts and jets, paragraph 3.1.3 of the UK financial sanctions guidance in December 2020 does not prohibit the use of assets even if those assets are technically frozen. Are we seriously saying that we will step back and watch people such as Abramovich and Usmanov parade around the world in jets and in yachts and make use of property here in the United Kingdom because we did not tighten up the regulations strongly enough? Are we in this House seriously prepared to stand by and watch that? I do not believe we are.

Mr Kevan Jones: Like my right hon. Friend, I am baffled by the Government's approach. The Foreign Secretary said that she had a list that they were working through, but does my right hon. Friend agree that the action taken not just in France but, for example, in Italy, where the Italian Government have taken over certain properties, is the level of action we want to see here, and that some of these regulations are limited in what they can actually do?

Liam Byrne: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are now seeing a sanctions gap emerge, where the UK is the soft touch, the weakest link, and the slowest to the punch. None of us in this House wants to be in this position. We all welcome the regulations that the Paymaster General has brought before the House this afternoon, but the question that we put back is: "Tell us what further power and resources you need so that we can genuinely be best in class around the world."

Mr David Davis: One of the reasons the sanctions are milder than perhaps the right hon. Gentleman or any of us would like may well be the problem that in British law, the stiffer the sanction, the greater the reaction. We may well have to take action in two stages, by freezing the assets in the first instance and then sequestering them.

Liam Byrne: That could well be the case, but if the Paymaster General has told us this afternoon that nothing is off the table, then we in this House need to hold him to his word and ask him to come back to us with an explanation, because at the moment the regime prohibits the dealing in economic resources but permits the Office

of Financial Sanctions Implementation to make available those resources. Personal consumption is not prohibited, according to the regulation. I guess we are asking him please to commit to us today to look at this question and bring back proposals for our urgent consideration, because I believe I speak for the whole House when I say that we will give the green light at a moment's notice.

I want to pull together some of the brilliant contributions that we have had in this debate over the past few years and, in particular, over the past couple of weeks. If we write down the contributions that we have heard from all hon. Members, we basically get a call on Ministers for a 10-point plan to drive hard behind the powers that are being granted. First, surely it is now time for a Minister for economic warfare. This came up in conversation with the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis). We are now settling into what will be a long confrontation with Russia, yet the sanctions team is in the Foreign Office, the instructions to the Bank of England are issued by the Treasury, and the Minister for Security is in the Home Office. I have been a Minister with a foot in two different Departments, and I can tell the House that it is an absolute nightmare. Surely it is now time to unite the political leadership in a single department for economic warfare that begins to take the fight to President Putin in a far more aggressive way.

Secondly, there are 12 different agencies currently tasked with taking on economic crime, and the Government, in their negligence, have not yet appointed a lead authority. Surely that now has to change. The National Crime Agency was bewildered to hear that a kleptocracy cell was being set up, as were the people in the National Economic Crime Centre. We have to do away with this nonsense and create a single lead agency that brings to this House a CONTEST-style strategy for taking on economic crime in which we prepare, protect and prevent, and pursue economic criminals to the ends of the earth.

Thirdly, there are Government reports that now need to see the light of day, starting with the Home Office's review of the golden visa scheme. The Home Secretary has said that her ambition is for it to be published. Why on earth has it not been published this week? We need to know where the weaknesses are, so let us get the facts on the table.

Fourthly, we need to resource the fight against economic crime far more seriously. Lynne Owens, the former director general of the National Crime Agency, is on the record as saying that its budget needs to double. When we consider the £100 billion-plus in economic damage to our country, surely doubling the National Crime Agency's budget is a very small ask of the Treasury. While we are at it, we need to introduce cost capping orders in relation to unexplained wealth orders, as the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) said, so that the costs of prosecution are that much smaller.

Fifthly, we need policy infrastructure such as a register of beneficial ownership of property and a proper targeting system based on our financial information. There is a group of urgently overdue laws that must be introduced over the next couple of months. We need a foreign agents registration Act, an update to GDPR legislation so that abusive data subject access requests can be stopped, and SLAPP-back laws to allow judges to throw out abuses and attempts to silence journalists such as brave Catherine Belton and Tom Burgis. We need updated espionage laws before the House as quickly as possible.

I have to say to the Government that there needs to be a ban on political donations from profits earned outside the UK. We need a regime for calling in donations from improper sources for national security assessment. Fortunately enough, the Elections Bill is in the House of Lords, and as it happens I have tabled amendments that would allow us to achieve exactly that. The answer that normally comes back—it is getting slightly wearing now—is “Just because there are people with Russian links donating to political parties, not all Russians are bad.” No one is saying that. Stop patronising our intelligence!

We have named specific individuals with links to Russia, such as Mohamed Amersi, who, together with his partner, has given £750,000 to the Conservative party, despite making millions of dollars from a deal that involved President Putin’s telecoms Minister. In case anybody is in any doubt about the gravity of the situation, let me quote from a letter from Carter-Ruck that I have been sent in defence of Mohamed Amersi.

Mr David Davis: Haven’t we all!

Liam Byrne: The right hon. Gentleman might have had a similar letter. Mine is many, many pages long and must have cost an absolute fortune. It says:

“Our client did not know, and cannot reasonably have been expected to know or suspect, that Ms Karimova was the ultimate controller of Takilant Limited”—

that was the corrupt telecoms deal that he was involved in. Anybody who was doing business in the country knew that that family were behind pretty much every major industry. Mr Amersi is many things, but he is not stupid. At the bottom of page 4, the letter goes on:

“To be clear, all of our client’s...dealings in Russia and the former Soviet Union...were entirely legitimate, lawful and transparent.”

Surely this is not the kind of individual that the Conservative and Unionist party should be taking money from. I could go on; I have made previous contributions in the House about the matter. Dmitry Leus—a man whose cheque the Prince’s Foundation has sent back—has given something like £30,000 to the Justice Secretary’s constituency party. Please stop patronising our intelligence, stop telling us that all the donations were given under the rules that existed at the time, stop pretending that we are trying to smear the entire Russian people, look at the people writing the cheques with suspect links, and pay the money back.

Let me set out the final couple of points in our 10-point plan. In addition to the five pieces of legislation that need updating, we need to update the regulation of the Solicitors Regulation Authority. Many of us have heard time and again how firms such as Mishcon de Reya and Carter-Ruck abuse the legal process in order to create and inflate costs and intimidate others. Frankly, that has to stop.

As the hon. Member for Isle of Wight said, it is a tragedy that it has taken a war to bring us together across the House around a plan for tackling economic crime. When the Berlin wall fell, and also on that tragic day of 9/11, I looked out on the world and thought, “We are moving into a different era”, and now I think we are moving into a different era again. We will need to rethink the way in which we fortify our frontline with Russia across the NATO territories, and we will need to get serious about taking on the cancer of economic crime once and for all. If we do that, I believe that we will ultimately prevail.

5 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): As I am speaking at a late stage in the debate, much of what needed to be said has already been said, so I will not repeat any of it. Let me instead make three brief points.

First, what really matter now are those things that have a systemic impact on the Russian economy and on Vladimir Putin’s ability to finance the war in which he is engaged in Ukraine. We must be careful, as a House, not to fail to see the wood for the trees and go down the rabbit hole of interest in individuals and oligarchs. That is of course important, and I will return to it in my second point, but it will not make a material difference in the short term. Many of those individuals are not close to Vladimir Putin today. Many of them left Russia or are dual nationals. The situation is highly complex. I will return to that in a moment, but what really matter, and will make a serious impact, are the measures that have, broadly speaking, been put in place over the last few days.

Like a number of Members on both sides of the House, I was disappointed that, when we had a debate on this subject towards the end of last week, the initial package of measures was very limited indeed, but now we find ourselves in a position where the UK, broadly in concert with our allies, has brought forward significant measures. For some time I advocated the move on SWIFT, and we were told that that was unlikely to happen. It has happened, and I am pleased that the UK played a significant part in advocating it, although I find it disappointing that it has been done in a partial manner. I wish that we could move to a point at which SWIFT is turned off from Russia more substantially, if not in its entirety, and I suspect that that is the UK Government’s ambition, but it is being held back by some others, particularly European allies, who rely on it to remit payments for oil and gas to Russian entities.

I think the sanctions that were put in place against the Russian central bank were by far the most significant that we have imposed as an international community, because part of the effort put in by Vladimir Putin over the last two or three years was to build up £600 billion of foreign currency reserves. The fact that half of that is based overseas, in foreign banks and foreign central banks, is extremely important and material, if we can truly freeze those assets and prevent the Putin regime from accessing them. I warmly support those changes and hope that they are effective; we will all have to follow events to see whether they really are in practice.

I am still not certain why the UK has not sanctioned all the major Russian banks. There are still some that we have not sanctioned, and I should like to hear a good answer to the question of why that is. There may be an answer, but I do not see it. There are vested interests across Europe; for example, some major banks in Russia are owned by SocGen—Société Générale, the French bank—so it is quite clear to me why the French Government would not want to sanction that particular bank, but I cannot see a good reason why the UK Government would not want now to sanction all the Russian banks, which is something that we could do quite quickly. I should be grateful if the Minister could, on this occasion or in future, make it clear why we are not doing it.

[Robert Jenrick]

When it comes to individuals, as I have said, I am sceptical about the impact of this in the short term. The term “oligarch” is bandied around, and there is a spectrum of those individuals, from people who are clearly gangsters to people who made money out of Russia in a way that none of us would regard as legitimate, but who are now quite distanced from the Putin regime. It will make very little difference in some cases, and in fact I suspect that Vladimir Putin will find it highly amusing and satisfying to see those individuals being punished.

Bob Seely: My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I fully understand that he is separating the institutional from the personal. The term “oligarch” is bandied about far too much, but does he accept that while the institutional stuff will hurt the Russian state, by targeting those people who remain close to Putin, we will then target him, especially if they remain the oligarchic facilitators of some of his overseas policy, which is effectively a parallel Kremlin policy to the official state?

Robert Jenrick: I do, and I completely understand what my hon. Friend is saying. The point I am trying to make is that we must not spend all our efforts on the individuals, although most of us would like to see those individuals punished in some way or form, and that the most important thing is to target the things that will have a real and major impact on Putin’s ability to finance his campaign in Ukraine. On the individuals, there is a distinction—as my hon. Friend has just said—between those individuals who we know through our intelligence to be directly involved in the Putin regime today and others who may have drifted away, and we should order in priority those individuals that we take action against.

My second point is that the regime we have in place for targeting individuals is clearly not fit for purpose. We were told that there was a hit list of oligarchs and that we would be taking action against them, yet days have passed and very few if any further individuals have been put on that list of sanctions. That leads me to believe that the legal bar that we have to reach before sanctioning those individuals is too high and that the group of officials doing that work is either insufficiently resourced or we do not have the right people. That is no disrespect to those officials, but we need to be able to sanction these individuals faster than we are doing today; otherwise, our rhetoric simply will not match up with reality. I am afraid that that is the situation today.

Anyone listening to the rhetoric would say that it is very strong, but the action is fairly weak. I would like to hear from the Minister what more we can do to help him and the Government to get those individuals sanctioned. As I say, it feels to me that that means more resources for the team providing the legal basis, and a lower legal test in order to sanction the individuals. If that requires changes to the legislation, let us bring them forward to the House, because there is clearly cross-party agreement on this.

My third point is that a large number of British businesses are going to be affected by the sanctions, the overwhelming majority of which are perfectly legitimate individuals and businesses in our own constituencies. I would like to see the Government bring forward some simple plain-English guidance for those businesses as

quickly as possible. It is not available today. If we look online, we can see that there is not much guidance at all, and the guidance that is available is quite complex. If we are going to ask businesses, including small ones, to abide by these rules and regulations, the Government need urgently to bring forward some plain-English guidance for them.

Linked to that is the point I made during the urgent question earlier in the week, which was that in order to address a small number of seriously bad apples, we must not do anything that hurts legitimate small businesses and entrepreneurs in this country. The issue I am most concerned about there is the reforms to Companies House in the White Paper. It is a great thing in this country that for £12 someone can incorporate a company and get their certificate of incorporation within 24 hours. With that comes a serious concern about nefarious intent from those individuals who are not legitimate businesses, but before we legislate for that, I want proper reassurances from the Government that legitimate businesses will not be hurt. I do not want to live in a country where that £12 becomes £500 or where 24 hours becomes four weeks, because we all know other jurisdictions around the world, including in Europe—France is an example—where it is much more complicated and time-consuming to incorporate a business and operate it legitimately.

Liam Byrne: The right hon. Gentleman is right to make this point. Surely we have to get the balance right, though. I say as a former Chief Secretary to the Treasury that we have to guard against the Treasury insisting that Companies House is in some way cost neutral—that it covers its own costs. We want to have good “know your customer” checks in place, but we also want to avoid that cost being loaded on to sky-high fees. I am afraid that resolving that balance might well require the Treasury to think creatively.

Robert Jenrick: As two former Treasury Ministers, we both know that situation. In these discussions, I strongly urge the Chancellor not to lose the UK’s obvious competitive advantage of being a jurisdiction in which it is easy to incorporate a company. I do not want small businesses to be badly affected by these measures. We all talk in this House of our desire to help small businesses or to cut red tape, but invariably we do the absolute opposite. Tackling corruption and money laundering must not come at the expense of legitimate businesses in our constituencies.

I will leave it there, but my central point to the Minister is that our strong words are not being matched by our actions. If there is anything we can do to legislate further, I urge him to do so. We would not want the UK to be a laggard in not sanctioning the banks and individuals that we all wish to sanction as soon as possible.

5.10 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): My party fully supports this sanctions regime, on which the Foreign Secretary gave us some insight yesterday. This is a great opportunity, because the whole House is united behind the Government. I think the only party that would perhaps show any dissent if it were here is Sinn Féin, whose spokesman today accused the Government of an act of jingoism in sending arms to the Ukrainian forces and whose Members have consistently voted against any sanctions in the European Parliament.

There is a unique opportunity for the Government to listen to the concerns that have been expressed and to the support for the proposals, and to say, "If we are going to do this, let's make sure we do it properly." We have waited a long time for these sanctions, and we should have done it sooner because we know the malign influence that the oligarchs and this corruption have had on our society. Now is the opportunity to do it. With the unity of the House, let us make sure we plug all the holes and ensure that the legislation is effective.

This is important. I suspect some people might think this is just an opportunity to bash Putin's friends here in the United Kingdom as a form of revenge that shows our opposition to his actions in Ukraine and the terrible way in which that country is being destroyed by his forces as we speak. As Members have shown in the House today, this is more about ensuring the gangster regime that is perpetrating the atrocities in Ukraine, that is seeking to stamp out democracy in that part of eastern Europe, is hit where it hurts.

Of course, as we have heard today, the whole point of the oligarchs and how they use their resources is to corrupt our society, to influence the political decisions we make, to ensure economic dependence on the Russian regime in other parts of Europe and to make sure that our future actions are limited because of their influence. If we do not remove that influence, all we do is prop up the very individual who is perpetuating what is happening in Ukraine at present.

It is clear that Putin requires the ability to show patronage to those whose support he needs, and the way in which abused wealth and illegally acquired wealth is used not just here but in other parts of the free world ensures that patronage.

I must say to the Minister that the weaknesses in the sanctions have been outlined, including the delay in implementing the orders. Yesterday, the Foreign Secretary told us the names of four banks that, in due time, when the legislation goes through, would have their assets frozen. I am sure that those banks are not sitting idly by today waiting until legislation goes through this House.

Although individuals were not named, we were told that certain categories of people would have sanctions imposed on them. I am sure that those individuals are clever enough to know that they are likely to be on the list when it comes out, or to fall into the sanctions net when it is in place, so they are hardly likely to be sitting around at present thinking, "I'm going to wait for it." They will be taking action to ensure that assets that could be seized or frozen are no longer there. While some assets such as houses are fixed, many are not, and yachts worth hundreds of millions of pounds, aircraft and financial assets can be moved to the many countries named in the House that are still sympathetic to the Russian regime and will not hand them over to make them available for seizure or freeze them.

The Minister explained that the 30-day delay was to protect British companies. Is it possible to distinguish between British companies that want to protect their assets and oligarchs and other groups who want to get their assets out of the way quickly because they know that they will be targeted? Perhaps he can outline that for us. That needs to be dealt with.

We have also heard in explicit detail about how those involved in hiding and investing the ill-gotten gains from the Putin regime are using facilitators here in the

United Kingdom. Whether it is done in the economic crime Bill or elsewhere, it is important that a message goes out to those people that they will be held culpable for what they do and how they use their powers. The one thing clear to me and to anyone following the debate is that the gangster regime that has taken over Russia has its tentacles in many parts of our economy—deep into some parts of our economy—and our civic society, and the legislation must deal with that.

We also need a level playing field. There is no point in having forces arrayed on one side against those with billions of assets to hide and protect—those who can use those assets to buy the best, and sometimes corrupt, facilitators to help them—while those trying to deal with them have limited resources. Whatever measures come forward—whether spending caps on legal cases or whatever; I am not an expert on that—must deal with that so that when we introduce sanctions, they are effective.

That is so important in a war to defend democracy in Ukraine and the people in Ukraine who see themselves facing oppression in the future. Since we will not give direct military support—I welcome that we are giving it indirectly—we must ensure that our economic weapons are used most effectively.

5.19 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson). To pick up his point at a moment of reflection, we are all tired because yesterday we were here until late voting, but I walked into work this morning with a spring in my step because we have a democracy to walk into work for. We are here in this debate in defence of another democracy, and what a debate it has been. My goodness, would Russia not be a very different place if it allowed this level of discourse and challenge from both sides of the House and of the Government? That is what we are defending.

I wish to put on record my delight—I hope the whole House will join me in this—in congratulating the Servant of the People party, the party of Volodymyr Zelensky, which has become an associate member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe. It marks the first step—one of many, I am sure—to show that the entire reason why Putin has done this, to try to split us apart, is not working and quite the opposite is happening. The Liberal Democrats are therefore proud to call the Servant of the People party our sister party, and I am sure all hon. Members feel that way about that party and all parties in Ukraine.

In that spirit of cross-party co-operation, I welcome these measures on behalf of the Liberal Democrat party. It is right that we are targeting the Russian financial sector and the export of dual-use and critical-use goods. I ask again about the 30-day grace period. One of the benefits of speaking last is that I waited for those who are much more practised in such things—a former Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, and others—to explain to me, a relatively new Member, what I did not understand. But I still do not understand. If we are not going to publish the names, even quietly, and assuming they do not leak, and if we cannot say who we are sanctioning and who is on that designated list, I do not understand how we can distinguish between a company that is legitimately winding up its business, and one that

[Layla Moran]

is winding up its illicit goods to go somewhere else. How do we do that without divulging that list to someone? I would like some explanation for that.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does the hon. Lady think it strange that the Government are reluctant to name the individuals they are going to sanction? Our European partners are not only sanctioning individuals, but taking property off them and naming them publicly. Does she understand why the Government are reluctant to do that?

Layla Moran: I am so grateful for that intervention, and I absolutely do not understand. I intervened about that at the beginning of the debate. I have listened to the whole debate and am none the wiser, having listened to many sage Members also try to work it out. I think we are owed an explanation from the Minister. He went away for a bit but he has come back, I hope with an explanation. What is going on? We have the benefit of parliamentary privilege in this place. I will not pre-empt what Mr Speaker may or may not allow in future business of the House, but if we need to sit here and read out all the names, we have to do it. But it should not be up to us, and a lot of the names are ones that the Government already have. The information is there, and there is no reason we should be waiting.

Some of the new names on the EU sanction list include Mikhail Fridman, Alisher Usmanov, Petr Aven, Igor Sechin, and Nikolay Tokarev—they are there. There is now a joint taskforce for sharing information, which is good. Apparently it always existed, so I did not quite understand the announcement—perhaps it is being shared more. However, if we look at the number of people we have sanctioned recently, it is nine, one of whom is Putin, which we all know is just symbolic. We can go further.

I disagree with the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), who said that these measures will not do very much. They will do quite a lot, because we know that is how Putin manages his money. If we go after these people, we are going after him. That is how he operates. The broader point, which it is important to make, is that it feels as if, because of the tragedy unfolding before our eyes, the wool is being pulled from many people's eyes. I fully congratulate Members across the House who have been raising these points over many years and indeed across many countries.

Our own reports have also warned about this, not least the Russia report, which states:

“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... The links of the Russian elite to the UK...provides access to UK companies and political figures and thereby a means for broad Russian influence in the UK. To a certain extent, this cannot be untangled.”

How did we get here? That was the question that the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) posed in his excellent speech. I will posit an answer. I think it was greed, and not just from one political party; it was a collective greed, and a wilful naivety to what has been in front of us. All the signs were there, and there was a collective wilful naivety for the sake of rapid economic growth and actually some very laudable aims—trade, for example, being a tool of diplomacy. We want to

support business and the City. All those things can be true at the same time, but there came a moment when some people sniffed a rat and they did not call the exterminator. That was many years ago.

I think it was the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) who described this as a cancer. As we know, removing a cancer is painful to the person who has it—it can even be dangerous—but the reason we do so is for the person's medium and long-term health. We have to do this, so I end simply by urging the Minister not to shy away from the difficult questions, or from things that are not coming in the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill and the overseas entities register, and to deal with some of the issues of lawfare, or at least put a framework in place in order to deal with them.

How can it be right, if transparency is the best disinfectant, that we do not allow our free press and media to investigate individuals and companies, because they are being consistently harassed? That is bad for democracy, so I hope to add my voice to all of those on the Back Benches in the debate. I urge the Minister, and the Government, to grasp this nettle, as painful as it may be. If he wants to go further and faster, the Liberal Democrats will support him.

5.26 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): I will give a brief preamble explaining why I support the sanctions. Then I will make three broad points, but I do not intend to take too long. We are all obviously struggling to come to terms with recent events, and tensions across Europe over the war in Ukraine are rising. It is shocking to recall that my own anxiety of nuclear war as a schoolboy in the 1970s and '80s is now being revisited on our children.

I do not believe that war is ever a justifiable means to resolve a disagreement or an argument. Those who die are ordinary people caught up in the arguments or ambitions of more powerful actors. The perhaps hackneyed expression “jaw, jaw, not war, war” is something that we should always strive for, but when the tanks and shells are raining down on innocent civilians, we must stand against the aggressor. While that is true of events in Ukraine, it is also true of conflict and aggression the world over. I hope that this is a lesson that we all take from the events that are unfolding. Like many I marched against the invasion of Iraq, and my opposition to the case for that conflict stands. From that position of opposition to war, I stand against the ongoing aggression of Mr Putin against the Ukrainian people today. I support the sanctions, as does my party, as a means for de-escalation and preservation of life.

I will make the following key points about how we progress. First, we must acknowledge that President Putin has gone to considerable efforts to sanction-proof his economy, and that London's reliance on dirty money must not impede international efforts to make such sanctions meaningful. That must be urgently addressed, such as by the mechanisms that were outlined by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). There needs to be a mechanism, a method, or at least an attempt to disaggregate UK businesses from the banks that are being given a 30-day warning that their assets are under

threat. There are also risks regarding cryptocurrencies and Bitcoin, which Mr Putin may use to evade such measures.

Secondly, we urgently need to tackle the impact of such sanctions on ourselves. The UK and Scottish Governments should bring forward, as a matter of urgency, proposals to increase the output of North sea oil and gas, and establish alternative energy opportunities to temper already escalating energy costs and secure supplies to our friends and allies in Europe.

Finally, we must urgently look at all possible means, such as a windfall tax on energy profits, to cushion the blow on the plight of our own people who are suffering the impacts of poverty and a cost of living crisis.

President Zelensky has shown formidable leadership and courage. We must do all we can to support his people, preserve life and bring peace to Ukraine.

5.30 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): My party and the whole House stand with Ukraine. Putin's attack on Ukraine is an unprovoked, unjustifiable outrage and all those responsible must be held responsible for their war crimes. It is a heinous violation of international law that will have tragic consequences—not just for the people of Ukraine, but for peoples right around our continent.

We stand in complete solidarity with the Ukrainian people as they bravely resist this assault. As this conflict goes on and on, and Putin becomes more and more desperate, the tactics he will use will become more barbaric. Therefore, the sanctions we employ against him must become more sophisticated, clearer and bolder. The horrific reports coming from Kharkiv and the alleged use of cluster munitions are already increasingly alarming. The attack today on a TV tower in Kyiv did little to justify the fabricated claims of de-Nazification, as they hit a holocaust memorial. It is our moral duty to do everything we can to help the Ukrainian people against what is a war crime, a clear war crime and more war crimes coming from Russia.

Somewhere in the Kremlin, there will be a desk officer in the Russian Foreign Ministry making a note of this debate. That note should say clearly that all MPs of every party implored the Government to go further. They all backed the sanctions that were being proposed, but they wanted more. More must come. That is a message I hope the Minister will take loud and clear from this debate.

Now is the time for the hardest possible sanctions to be taken against all those linked to Putin and his tyrannical regime, and against all the Russian Government's interests, working in a co-ordinated and unified way with our allies to ensure that the Putin regime faces the severest possible consequences for its aggression. As was made clear by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), there is now a sanctions gap between what the United Kingdom is proposing and what our EU friends are proposing. We must close that gap and do so immediately.

Labour will, of course, support these sanctions tonight and I think every party in this House will be doing the same. We have pledged to work with the Government to ensure that we can proceed quickly to ensure that the House can pass the necessary legislative measures.

When the Government bring forward further measures, we will work at speed to ensure they can be passed. But there is still so much more to be done. Our Parliament sends a united message that we stand up for justice, democracy and sovereignty against the aggressor, and that we condemn in the strongest possible terms Vladimir Putin's heinous and unnecessary invasion. We stand unequivocally with the Ukrainian people. The Minister must be in no doubt that there is more work to be done.

I want to briefly summarise the excellent speeches made on both sides of the House. Three main themes have been raised in this debate. First, much more is needed. Bolder sanctions are needed and soon. That means matching what our EU friends have done. It means closing the sanctions gap—that was very clearly set out—and it means acting faster against oligarchs who have been hiding Putin's wealth, and through whom actions will have the biggest effect on the Putin regime. I pay tribute to Members such as the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) who set out clearly how that web, that network of oligarchs, helps to keep Putin in power. He survives on a sea of dirty money hidden in companies, behind the facades run by the oligarchs. We must go further to tackle them.

The second point that was clear in this debate is that we must target more individuals and more companies. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) made very clear that while some of our EU friends are targeting fixed assets, the UK Government have chosen not to do so yet. Some members of the public watching this debate will not understand why the French and Italian Governments are going after the mansions of oligarchs in their countries, while the oligarchs in the UK are able to enjoy their luxury lifestyles. The Minister says that he is doing more and I want to see that, because we need to explain to the British public that we are taking those measures. We want the Government to go further and we must do that.

The third point, however, is a difficult one for the House. Brilliant speeches by Members on both sides made it clear that we must get our house in order. My right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) made a clear proposal about reform of Companies House, which is long overdue and must be done at pace. Another consultation will not cut it; we need lasting reform.

The hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) made a clear case for getting the City of London to step up. He remarked that “morals and money are not always mutually exclusive”. That will be a good lesson for many in the City of London—the corporate lawyers and bankers, the people who enable the dirty money to flow and who seek to shut down criticism—to take on board.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight spoke about enablers and about Michael Foot. As a Plymouth MP, I feel that when someone mentions Michael Foot, it is normally good to quote him back. However, the hon. Member is right to draw parallels between this and Michael Foot's “Guilty Men”, to talk about those who appeased and those who did not act when they could have done so. We must look closely at the hon. Member's remarks about the guilty men of today—the men and women who facilitate the agents of fascism—but we must not pretend that that is news to us. This House is aware of Putin's actions, painfully so—and not just in Georgia, Crimea and Salisbury. We have seen his actions

[*Luke Pollard*]

and *modus operandi*, and we know that to tackle them we need to go further on sanctions and on joining up our efforts with our friends.

The sanctions that we are debating are supported, but I want to pick up on a point about the dual-use sanctions. When we looked at the different areas, we largely concentrated, rightly, on financial instruments. However, on dual-use sanctions, we are talking about not just dual-use goods, but ingredients and components of weapons of war, and it is clear that we should not allow UK companies to export them. I would like the Minister, with his officials, to look at whether there can be greater clarity on what dual-use items can be used in space, because overhead observation is an important part of what is happening in Ukraine. I would be grateful if he commented on the proposed OneWeb satellite launch—a publicly funded satellite provider—at the Baikonur cosmodrome, because it is not right that UK-funded satellite launches are taking place in what is effectively a Russian-backed facility. I would also like to press him on whether our UK satellites could be launched from our European facilities in French Guyana, which would ensure that we keep control and that progress on that project was unhindered.

I want to pick up on some points made about Belarus. If it is true that the invasion of Ukraine is not just Russian, but that Belarusian Government forces are engaged as well, we need to be clear that the sanctions must apply equally to the Government of Belarus, the financial instruments of Belarus and the powers that keep its dictator in power. Russia and Belarus are in a joint enterprise, as was mentioned. Belarus is a Russian client state.

The UK Government initially sanctioned Russia because of its recognition of the so-called breakaway republics. Why are we not using the same tools to pre-emptively sanction Belarus? If Belarusian forces engage in an attack on Kyiv or if they participate in or support Russian aggression any further than they have done, why are we not saying that here is the big stick that the west will hit them with? Let us get those sanctions ready. Let us get them supported. They can be activated on the intelligence that the Minister will be able to see but might not be able to share. We need to send a message, however, that Russian aggression and the aggression of any client states are unacceptable.

We have the ability to go further and the Government know that they will have the support of the House if they do. We can do much more to cut Putin's rogue regime out of our financial system in terms of not just the banks and the threatening lawyers, but the property and the money stolen from the Russian people that has flowed through the City of London like a stinking sewer for far too long. A number of Members have made the point that it should not have taken a war for action to be taken. This is not a war of our choice, nor is it the choice of the Ukrainian people, but a war has started so our actions need to be serious and severe.

We need to go further. That is why Labour is urging the Government to widen the sanctions; to increase the list of individuals who have been sanctioned; to reform Companies House to crack open the shell companies that are hiding suspect wealth; to introduce an overseas

entities Bill to lift the veil on property ownership; and, finally, to bring forward the full details of the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill to enhance that.

We do need to go much further, and that is what this House is calling for. Britain has a proud history of standing up to dictators and this House has a proud history of working in a cross-party fashion to enable the Government of the day to stand up to dictators. That is why the actions that I hope the Minister will take in the coming days should go far beyond the statutory instruments before us. Labour will not oppose the SIs—indeed, we support them—but we encourage the Minister, his colleagues and officials to go further, much further, because President Putin must be in no doubt about the resolve of this House to stand with the Ukrainian people and to hunt down the dirty money that enables his regime.

5.40 pm

Michael Ellis: With the leave of the House, I will close this debate. The last three hours have shown us that the House stands united. It has shown us many things, but one of those is that we speak as one in support of Ukraine. Everyone I have heard in this debate, and I have been here almost the whole time, has welcomed these messages. I am grateful to Members who have contributed—there have been insightful and timely discussions—and I will try to address and respond to some of the important questions they have raised.

I emphasise that nothing is off the table. The measures we have taken have already had a hugely significant impact, but we are exploring what more we can do. We are consulting our allies to that end; in this interconnected world, it is crucial that we act as one where we possibly can. I cannot speculate on future designations; that would be inappropriate for many reasons—not least, as many have said, that it might warn individuals whom we would not wish to warn in advance. However, it is thanks to the leadership of the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary that we have seen the most significant impacts. I want to address some of these points.

It has been said, for example, that the United Kingdom's position has not been in tune with that of Europe. On the contrary, our position has been a leading one as far as the European Union response is concerned, but this is not a competition. Many Members have said that more can be done, and I accept that. However, the United Kingdom has placed an asset freeze on VTB, the second largest bank in Russia—an enormous institution—and we have done that along with the United States. The United Kingdom has banned sterling clearing with Sberbank, the largest bank in Russia. The United Kingdom has banned all Russian companies—over 3 million of them—from issuing securities and raising debt. The European Union has done none of those things, but we are focusing on high-impact measures.

It was mentioned that we need to target those listing on the London stock exchange. We have, as I say, prevented 3 million-plus Russian companies from listing on the London stock exchange. As the debate has been going on this very afternoon, I can tell the House that we have designated the Russian Direct Investment Fund and its chief executive officer, Kirill Alexandrovich Dmitriev. That has occurred this afternoon.

One Member—I think it was my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami)—asked about delisting existing securities. Although nothing is off the table, delisting existing securities could harm the investments of people in the United Kingdom without having any impact on those who originally issued them. That is why our measures are forward looking, including to prevent the raising of funds by all Russian companies.

The right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) mentioned Companies House, as did a number of other colleagues. As the right hon. Lady may know, the Business Secretary has announced a White Paper on corporate transparency and register reform, greatly increasing the information available. We are legislating for reform of limited partnerships law, new powers to seize crypto-assets, reforms to help businesses share information on money laundering, a register of overseas entities and a requirement for foreign owners to reveal their identities, so work is massively in progress in that regard.

Various colleagues asked about designated persons and their substantial assets. I emphasise that the asset freeze criminalises dealing with the economic resources of a designated person, so were UK nationals and firms to go on to deal with those designated persons, they would be committing a criminal offence, the sanctions for which are considerable.

I was asked about Crown dependencies and overseas territories. I understand that designations made under the regulations will apply automatically in the Crown dependencies. There may be a small lag in terms of the overseas territories, but I am happy to write to Members about that. We will check that position, but we are speaking as one, as are so many allies around the world. The Government agree that more enforcement resource is necessary. One or two colleagues mentioned that from the Labour Front Bench, and the point is accepted. That is why the Prime Minister announced a new National Crime Agency kleptocracy cell, targeting sanctions evasion. We are also introducing the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill today to reform unexplained wealth orders, removing key barriers to their use by the NCA.

I was asked about a shipping matter by my colleague on the Opposition Front Bench, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). UK Government Ministers have now signed legislation banning all ships that are Russian owned, operated, controlled, chartered, registered or flagged from entering British ports. That was effective from 3 pm this afternoon.

The position as far as the Donbas is concerned is that the Foreign Secretary has been clear that we will put these measures in place and extend measures applying to the Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk regions. On insurance, it will be prohibited to provide insurance or reinsurance to or for the benefit of designated persons in relation to controlled goods and technology.

On guidance, we have already issued statutory guidance, and the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation will be issuing further Russia guidance in due course. As to further banks, the Foreign Secretary has set out her

intention to apply an asset freeze to all Russian banks, and I mention the wind-down period of 30 days, which a couple of colleagues also mentioned. The wind-down on certain measures is to allow UK businesses to close their affairs in an orderly fashion. I understand that the same process is taking place under the United States regulations and the European Union regulations. We are all acting as one here. It does not enable designated persons to move money. A request was made about a ban on state debt, which it was said applies in the European Union but not in the United Kingdom. That ban is in the regulations, which are in force now.

As far as the general position is concerned, the House will know that there has been a movement around the world to act in support of Ukraine. That is being led by this Government. It is being led in the field of lethal aid and financial aid, and it was led in the field of aviation sanctions and in the field of sanctions generally. As I mentioned in my opening speech, Her Majesty's Government are determined to continue to work in close co-ordination with our allies to deal a devastating blow to the Putin regime and undermine its ability—his ability—to wage war in Ukraine. This House's support for these regulations sends a clear, indefatigable message to the Kremlin and the people of Ukraine. I commend these regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2022 (SI, 2022, No. 194), dated 28 February 2022, a copy of which was laid before this House on 28 February, be approved.

RUSSIA (SANCTIONS) (EU EXIT) (AMENDMENT) (NO. 3) REGULATIONS 2022

Resolved,

That the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations 2022 (SI, 2022, No. 195), dated 28 February 2022, a copy of which was laid before this House on 28 February, be approved.—(*Michael Ellis.*)

NATIONAL INSURANCE CONTRIBUTIONS BILL: PROGRAMME (NO. 2)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the National Insurance Contributions Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 14 June 2021 (National Insurance Contributions Bill (Programme)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

1. Proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.
2. The proceedings shall be taken in the following order: Lords Amendments 2, 4, 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12.

Subsequent stages

3. Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.
4. The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

National Insurance Contributions Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I must draw the House's attention to the fact that financial privilege is engaged by all of the Lords amendments 2, 4, 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12. If any of the Lords amendments are agreed to, I will cause the customary entry waiving Commons financial privilege to be entered in the *Journal*.

Clause 2

FREPORT CONDITIONS

5.51 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Frazer): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 2.

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

Lords amendment 4, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendments 1, 3 and 5 to 12.

Lucy Frazer: I welcome this small but important Bill on its return to this House and I am pleased to speak to it for the first time. I pay tribute to my ministerial colleague, Viscount Younger of Leckie, for his work on it in the other place, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), who so capably led it when it was first before the House.

There are 12 Lords amendments for our consideration today and I will first address Lords amendments 2 and 4, which, as Madam Deputy Speaker has highlighted, engage the financial privilege of this House. The Government ask the House to reject them for the reasons that I will set out. Lords amendment 2 is the first of two amendments on which the other place voted to make changes to the Bill. It adds an additional condition whereby freeport national insurance contribution relief would be available only if the freeport governance body maintained a public record of beneficial ownership of businesses operating in the freeport tax site.

The Government believe that the Lords amendment, which was made by the other place, is unnecessary and should not be accepted. Throughout the bidding prospectus and subsequent business case processes, prospective freeports were required to set out how they will manage the risk of illicit activity. Those plans were scrutinised by officials in the Border Force, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the National Crime Agency and others.

Additionally, the freeports bidding prospectus set out that each freeport must agree a governance structure with the Government. While each port can design its own governance structure to meet the local needs of the port, it must meet the criteria set out by the Government in the freeports bidding guidance. That means that the Government already require each freeport governance body to undertake reasonable efforts to verify the beneficial ownership of businesses operating within the freeport tax site and to make that information available to HMRC, law enforcement agencies and other relevant public bodies. It is therefore a condition of being granted freeport status that there is an appropriate level of oversight.

That is a proportionate approach, which means that the local area and law enforcement can take effective measures to ensure the security and propriety of operations within the freeport. The difference between the amendment and the existing requirement on freeport governance bodies is simply a requirement for the freeport governance body to make its record of beneficial ownership available to the general public, as well as to law enforcement.

Given the nature of the information, we do not think it would be appropriate for the freeport governance body to release this information publicly. This is because the freeport governance board is a third party, and therefore does not have the locus to release such information about a business to the public. The second reason is that such a requirement would also partially duplicate the People with Significant Control register at Companies House where there is already an onus on the company itself to provide information.

However, hon. Members will also be aware that, as a Government, we are bringing in a number of measures to ensure that we have transparency. Last week, the Prime Minister announced the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill to further crack down on dirty money and maintain the UK's position as a world leader in corporate transparency, and we have heard much of that in this House today. That Bill will introduce a register of overseas entities beneficial ownership of UK property to crack down on foreign criminals using UK property to launder money. It will reform our unexplained wealth orders regime to help target more corrupt elites and it will strengthen the Treasury's ability to take action against sanction breaches.

We will also publish details of the planned fundamental reform of Companies House, which is designed to clamp down on money laundering and illicit finance. Once the register of overseas entities is implemented, it will be the first of its kind in the world. That is good news for the UK, enhancing our strong reputation as an honest and trusted place in which to do business. I hope that, with these assurances, this House will reject Lords amendment 2.

Lords amendment 4 is the second amendment on which the other place voted to make changes to the Bill. It provides the Treasury with the power to amend the eligibility period attached to zero-rate relief for armed forces veterans. The Government believe that this amendment made by the other place is not necessary and should not be accepted. I will explain to this House why that is the case. The Government have considered this measure in detail and consulted extensively on the relief. It included a policy consultation that ran from July to October 2020 and a technical consultation that ran from January to March 2021. A significant number of respondents agreed that the relief is a positive step forward towards supporting the recruitment of veterans and could help break down the barriers and negative perceptions surrounding veterans.

After considering the responses, we felt that a 12-month qualifying period struck the right balance between supporting veterans as they transitioned to civilian life and wider taxpayers' interests. Members should also be aware that employer representatives, such as the Federation of Small Businesses, welcomed the 12-month relief when it was announced. This policy provides employers in the 2021-22 tax year with up to £5,500 of relief. It is also one part of the Government's broader strategy to support veterans.

The Government recently published the veterans' strategy action plan for 2022 to 2024. That contains more than 60 policy commitments worth more than £70 million in a diverse range of areas, reflecting the varied streams of Government support on offer.

Furthermore, at the 2021 Budget and spending review, £10 million was provided to support mental health via charities provisions and £5 million to the health innovation fund, providing cutting-edge treatment for veterans. In August 2021, £2.7 million was provided to strengthen veteran health support further, including facilitating the expansion of Op Courage, and a further £5 million was provided in September 2021 for those struggling after the Afghanistan withdrawal. The Bill already contains other levers to increase the generosity of this relief, if needed, such as increasing the threshold that employers of veterans start paying NICs and extending the overall period of the relief. These proposed additional powers are therefore not necessary. With these reassurances, I hope that the House will reject Lords amendment 4.

The remaining 10 Lords amendments were tabled by the Government and I hope that this House will support them. Lords amendments 1, 3 and 5 to 9 legislate for the threshold at which employers that qualify for these reliefs start to pay NICs. The amendments set the threshold for the 2022-23 tax year for freeport employers and for the 2021-22 and 2022-23 tax year for the employers of veterans. These thresholds have been set at £25,000 per annum for freeport employers and £50,270 for employers of veterans. Both those figures have been publicly communicated during the Bill's passage. These thresholds are normally set through regulations, but due to the timing of this Bill they are being set in primary legislation.

6 pm

Lords amendments 10, 11 and 12 relate to changes the Government are proposing in response to the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee's report on the Bill. These Government amendments, tabled in the other place, provide for additional parliamentary scrutiny over certain powers in the Bill. Our approach here demonstrates the seriousness we place on those recommendations and the Government's commitment to act upon them. Lords amendment 10 ensures that regulations to specify future self-isolation support schemes that would be exempt from self-employment NICs under clause 10 must be subject to the negative procedure. Originally, these regulations were subject to no procedure. Lords amendments 11 and 12 provide for regulations under clause 3(1) and 6(6) to be subject to the draft affirmative procedure. Regulations may be made under these powers to extend the end date of the freeport and veterans' relief. These powers were previously subject to the negative procedure. So I hope that hon. Members will agree with the position I have set out today.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for setting out the reasoning behind the Government's amendments in the other place. Although we support many of the measures in this Bill, we cannot ignore the fact that we are discussing the Government's plans for specific relief from NICs just one month before they raise national insurance for workers and businesses across the board. That is the crucial context for the Lords amendments we are being asked to consider.

Five weeks from today, a typical full-time worker will see their annual tax bill rise by £274. That will be the direct result of the Government's decision to raise NI. It is the worst possible tax rise, at the worst possible time. We argued it was wrong last September, when the Government pushed this tax rise through Parliament. Since then, energy bills have begun to soar, making our case even stronger. Now, as we stand alongside the Ukrainian people, we know that that conflict will impact people here, with further price rises for petrol, energy and food. The Conservatives must think again. The impact of their NI hike is getting worse and worse. The Chancellor should finally do the right thing and scrap April's tax rise on businesses and working people.

As we said when this Bill was being debated in the Commons last year, we support the intention behind many of its measures. However, throughout its passage, we and our colleagues in the other place have raised important questions with Ministers about some of the approaches the Government have decided to take. With that in mind, I turn to Lords amendments 2 and 4, which were successful in the other place and which we will be supporting here today. Lords amendment 2 seeks to add one further condition to those that already exist in the Bill for freeports. When it was introduced, this Bill included the conditions under which employers in a freeport could benefit from a zero rate of secondary class 1 NICs. This amendment adds one further condition to freeport employers' relief. It would make sure this relief is available only if the freeport maintains a public record of the beneficial ownership of businesses operating within it. We, alongside right hon. and hon. Members from across the House, have long argued for transparency over the ownership of UK assets. In recent days, that has come to a head, with the Government finally admitting and accepting the urgent importance of establishing a public register of the overseas owners of UK property. Yesterday, when the Business Secretary made a statement to the House on "Corporate Transparency and Economic Crime", no one could deny the damage caused by the Government's failing to prioritise transparency of the overseas ownership of UK interests. As my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) told the House yesterday, although we clearly support the Government's introducing a register of overseas owners of UK property, we are clear that:

"The UK would have been in a much stronger position to act with speed and our national security would have been better protected if the register had already been up and running."—[*Official Report*, 28 February 2022; Vol. 709, c. 736.]

As my hon. Friend went on to say yesterday, we hope lessons will be learned for the future. The Government have a chance today to prove that they have learned those lessons. Let us avoid their pressing ahead today without that transparency condition, only to return to the matter in a rush at a later date when the opportunity for greatest impact may already have been missed. That is why we will support Lords amendment 2, and I urge Government Ministers and hon. Members on all sides to do likewise.

I turn now to Lords amendment 4, which was also successful in the other place and which we will support today. The Government's Bill introduces a zero rate of national insurance contributions for employers of armed forces veterans for the period of one year beginning with the earner's first day of civilian employment after

[James Murray]

leaving the armed forces. We believe it is crucial to ensure that all veterans get the support they need as they seek civilian employment.

Lords amendment 4 enables the Treasury to change the period of support offered if it is found to support employment. We believe it is a simple measure, giving the Government flexibility to adjust the operation of the relief if doing so might improve veterans' ability to find long-term employment.

As the Financial Secretary may know, when the Bill was debated in the Commons last year we raised questions about the time period for which the relief would be available. When I discussed this Bill with her predecessor, the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), I asked him to explain in greater detail why the Government had chosen a period of one year for veterans' employers. In response, he said that one year was appropriate because,

"the goal is to support a very specific process of transition".

When we pressed him further on the importance of helping to maintain long-term employment, he acknowledged:

"If it were the case that veterans still had a serious problem of finding secure and stable employment, of course that would be a matter that the Government would wish to reflect on and consider."

He assured me and several of my hon. Friends that he would,

"continue to reflect on this policy",

and that those at the Treasury,

"already have in place processes of evaluation and assessment."—
[*Official Report, National Insurance Contributions Public Bill Committee*, 22 June 2021; c. 18-20.]

I am sure the right hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer) will want to honour those commitments made by her predecessor.

Through Lords amendment 4, we seek simply to give the Government the power to change the period of relief, should their ongoing analysis conclude it is in the best interests of veterans to do so. On that basis, I urge the Financial Secretary and her colleagues to reconsider the Government's position. I hope that Ministers and hon. Members on the Government Benches will see the value that Lords amendments 2 and 4 add to this Bill and that, even at this late stage, they might reconsider their position on them.

I end by urging Ministers to ensure that next time we are in this Chamber with national insurance on the Order Paper, it will be to agree to cancel the tax rise coming next month. The Chancellor has five weeks to do the right thing—five weeks to change his mind and avoid hitting working people and businesses with the worst possible tax rise at the worst possible time.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I rise to support Lords amendments 2 and 4, but I will deal first with amendment 4.

As I said at earlier stages of this Bill, those who have experience of serving within the armed forces bring tremendous qualities to the workforce through both the skills they have learned while in uniform and their breadth of life experience. Despite our awareness of that and the best efforts of Governments and the third sector, for too many of our ex-servicemen who are leaving the services, the transition to civvy street is far more difficult than it often needs to be.

Having this exemption for national insurance contributions is therefore a very positive step as far as we are concerned, making it even more attractive to employers to hire those ex-service personnel and to bring their skills and experience into the workforce, helping to bring to fruition all the many economic and social benefits that can come from that. In that regard, we are attracted to Lords amendment 4 simply because it gives the Treasury that power to extend the eligibility period attached to the zero rate relief for armed forces personnel and veterans, should that be deemed desirable. That seems to us to be a perfectly reasonable addition to make to the Bill, giving the Treasury a degree of flexibility on how to implement the measure that would otherwise be lacking in the Bill as drafted.

On amendment 2, let me first place on record my satisfaction at the agreement that has eventually been reached by the Scottish Government and the UK Government over freeports, or green ports, of which two will now be established in Scotland, with the bidding process opening in spring this year and the first sites opening, hopefully, in spring 2023. I will go a little bit off piste here to say that that outcome was not always guaranteed, and at times, in at least some of the public discussions, there has been a bit more war-war than jaw-jaw, certainly on the part of individual Conservative politicians rather than between Ministers in Edinburgh and London. For example, the Scottish Business Minister, Ivan McKee, had to write six times to the UK Government to even try to get green port discussions under way in order to get them over the line. He said that the silence was deafening. That is a pretty damning account that rather sits at odds with the impression that we are often given from those on the Treasury Bench as to how they would like to work constructively with the Scottish Government.

The reason for holding out on the variation on the freeports option was quite simple. We felt very strongly that given the scale of the financial support that was on offer, it was vital to ensure that wider policy objectives such as environmental obligations, the commitment to net zero and fair play for those employed within freeport sites, were met. While it is up to the UK Government to decide how those objectives can be met in England, applicants for green port status in Scotland will be required to set out robust plans at the outset on how they plan to contribute to Scotland's just transition to a net zero economy and how they will benefit the wider supply chain alongside embedding fair working practices such as at least paying the real living wage.

Freeports, it is fair to say, have had a somewhat mixed reception abroad, particularly as regards the relationship that they are perceived to have with criminality and tax evasion. While hardly the "Grand Theft Auto"-style dystopia that they have sometimes been portrayed as, the potential for criminality and non-compliance with taxation, employment rights, health and safety or environmental regulations and obligations is clear, as is the potential for broader economic displacement.

That brings me to the nub of amendment 2. In recent weeks, we have seen significantly increased demand from this House for scrutiny and visibility of financial transactions that take place in this country. We need to have that increased scrutiny over those who spend and invest in the UK, and also over where their money originates. It is very important when setting up freeports

that we are able to answer the age-old question, “cui bono?” That is absolutely paramount. A requirement that the freeport deliverance body should be able to make reasonable efforts to verify who the beneficial owners of the business are and to ensure that that information is accessible not just to the relevant enforcement agencies but to the general public is the minimum amount of due diligence that we should expect in exchange for the status and the exemptions on offer.

I listened carefully to the Minister’s arguments about the beneficial register that will be in place and her view that as a third party under the local governance arrangements it would be inappropriate to release that information. Respectfully, I disagree with that. We all know how labyrinthine and byzantine corporate structures can be. Irrespective of any requirement in future legislation that may be coming into force, certainly on freeports, my party firmly believes that we should have transparency and accountability baked into the corporate structure and public reporting at the outset. On that basis, both Lords amendments have our support and we shall be voting accordingly.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I spoke on Second Reading and at other stages before the Bill went to the Lords, but it is fair to say that I now stand in a very different environment. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine last week, so many aspects of our economy, our international relations and our defence strategy have been cast in a new light.

In that spirit, I rise to support Lords amendment 2, which was introduced by my good friend and Richmond Park predecessor, Baroness Kramer. In the past week, we have had cause to look again not just at our defence spending and at the importance of our international relationships, but most importantly at how the UK—London in particular—has become a haven for Russian money, at what it has done to us as a nation and at how it has undermined our efforts to stand with the brave people of Ukraine.

6.15 pm

I very much welcome the Government’s plans to introduce their economic crime Bill. I look forward to its progress through the House in the coming weeks and welcome what it represents about the Government’s attitude to addressing what has been a known issue for many years; I am glad that we are now addressing it, even if it is in response to the most tragic of circumstances in Ukraine. However, it seems to me that if we are sincere about the change in attitude that is now required, we should think again about our new legislation’s provisions on money laundering. As has been pointed out, not least by me and other hon. Members at earlier stages of the Bill, one of the principal issues with freeports is the risk of money laundering.

It seems remiss not to use this opportunity to strengthen the Bill’s provisions to provide greater transparency, which is key. We can pass legislation to regulate freeports—I listened carefully to what the Minister said she thought would be sufficient controls to guard against money laundering—but what will above all help our nation to deal with the dirty money washing through our industries, our banking sector and all the other parts of our economy is transparency.

I am afraid I do not think that the measures that the Minister outlined are good enough. It is not enough for Companies House to maintain a record; what is clearly required is transparency. We need a publicly available register of the companies making use of freeports. What is the source of their wealth? What are they trading in? Who are the beneficial owners? Without that information, it will be impossible to know who is operating in the freeports and for what purpose.

Now is the time. Now is the opportunity to put provisions in place not just to prevent money laundering in freeports, but to send a clear message that as a nation we are cleaning up our act. That would show that we have looked at the issue, have acknowledged it as a problem and are not just clearing up the current mess, but guarding against future abuses of our financial system and against the use of our economy, our businesses and our financial system for money laundering. That is why it is so important to support Lords amendment 2 and oppose the Government’s motion to disagree.

Lucy Frazer: With the leave of the House, I will make a few comments in response to hon. Members.

The hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray) mentioned tax rises and national insurance contributions. The Government recognise the impact that they will have on those to whom they are applied, but it is vital that we tackle social care—we cannot avoid taking it on. He will know, because we have debated them many times, the measures that the Government are taking to ensure that those on the lowest incomes get the protection that they need. For example, we are increasing the national living wage and cutting tax for low-income families in relation to universal credit.

This, however, is a debate about some other measures, and one of the important measures that have been raised relates to transparency. The hon. Member for Ealing North suggested that we had been slow to act, while the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) rightly said that we should pause and look again. Let me emphasise that we have not been slow to act, in the sense that we were the first country in the G20 to create a free, fully public beneficial ownership register, and on that register we have 5.6 million names and more than 4.4 million UK companies. We have not been slow to act, and we have looked again, because we are introducing a register of beneficial owners of overseas entities, we are introducing further powers in relation to unexplained wealth orders, and we are introducing further powers to sanction for the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation.

Moreover, today the Government are publishing a detailed White Paper that will upgrade the powers in relation to Companies House. For example, anyone setting up, running, owning or controlling a company in the UK will need to verify their identity with Companies House. Companies House will be given the power to challenge information that appears dubious, and will be empowered to inform security agencies of potential wrongdoing. Company agents from overseas will no longer be able to create companies in the UK. So we are taking measures now, and we have reflected before taking those steps.

The hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) raised the issue of veterans, and I too am proud that we are introducing measures to make it easier to employ them. We have set out our reasons for keeping the measure in

[Lucy Frazer]

relation to the 12-month period, and I highlighted them in my opening speech, but, as Members will know, we will review that policy in 2023. I am also pleased that, as the hon. Member for Gordon said, the UK and Scottish Governments announced the establishment of two freeports earlier this month.

For those reasons, I hope that the House will agree with the points that I have made.

Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 2.

The House divided: Ayes 295, Noes 198.

Division No. 202]

[6.22 pm]

AYES

Adams, rh Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Anderson, Lee
Andrew, rh Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Badenoch, Kemi
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baldwin, Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Jake
Bhatti, Saqib
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, rh Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Britcliffe, Sara
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Rob
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carter, Andy
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Clarke, Theo
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey

Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, rh Michelle
Dorries, rh Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, rh Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon (*Proxy vote cast by Christopher Pincher*)
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, rh Lucy
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger

Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gideon, Jo
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Kate
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan (*Proxy vote cast by Christopher Pincher*)
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Hunt, Tom
Javid, rh Sajid
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, Gillian
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lockhart, Carla
Loder, Chris

Logan, Mark
Lopez, Julia
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackrory, Cherilyn
Maclean, Rachel
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Esther
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, rh Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Prentis, Victoria
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Richardson, Angela
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Rutley, David
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Seely, Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, rh Alok
Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Simmonds, David
Skidmore, rh Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Greg

Smith, Henry
 Smith, Royston
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie

Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Webb, Suzanne
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Amanda Solloway and
Alan Mak

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Begum, Apsana
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Bryant, Chris
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Crawley, Angela
 Creasy, Stella
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Daby, Janet
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Geraint
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha

Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farry, Stephen
 Fellows, Marion
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Flynn, Stephen
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Kate
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hanna, Claire
 Hanvey, Neale
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hendry, Drew
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon

Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mc Nally, John
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moran, Layla
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James

Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Turner, Karl
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Jessica Morden and
Lilian Greenwood

Question accordingly agreed to.
Lords amendment 2 disagreed to.

Clause 7

VETERAN CONDITIONS

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 4.—(Lucy Frazer.)

The House divided: Ayes 298, Noes 199.

Division No. 203]

[6.36 pm

AYES

Adams, rh Nigel
 Afolami, Bim

Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie

Aldous, Peter	Dorries, rh Ms Nadine	Hudson, Dr Neil	O'Brien, Neil
Allan, Lucy	Double, Steve	Hunt, Jane	Offord, Dr Matthew
Anderson, Lee	Dowden, rh Oliver	Hunt, rh Jeremy	Opperman, Guy
Andrew, rh Stuart	Doyle-Price, Jackie	Hunt, Tom	Paisley, Ian
Argar, Edward	Drax, Richard	Javid, rh Sajid	Parish, Neil
Atkins, Victoria	Drummond, Mrs Flick	Jenkin, Sir Bernard	Penning, rh Sir Mike
Bacon, Gareth	Duguid, David	Jenkinson, Mark	Penrose, John
Badenoch, Kemi	Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Johnson, Dr Caroline	Philp, Chris
Baillie, Siobhan	Dunne, rh Philip	Johnson, Gareth	Pincher, rh Christopher
Baker, Duncan	Eastwood, Mark	Johnston, David	Prentis, Victoria
Baldwin, Harriett	Edwards, Ruth	Jones, Andrew	Pursglove, Tom
Barclay, rh Steve	Ellis, rh Michael	Jones, rh Mr David	Quin, Jeremy
Baron, Mr John	Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias	Jones, Fay	Quince, Will
Baynes, Simon	Elphicke, Mrs Natalie	Jones, Mr Marcus	Redwood, rh John
Bell, Aaron	Eustice, rh George	Jupp, Simon	Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Benton, Scott	Evans, Dr Luke	Kawczynski, Daniel	Richardson, Angela
Beresford, Sir Paul	Evennett, rh Sir David	Kearns, Alicia	Robertson, Mr Laurence
Berry, rh Jake	Everitt, Ben	Keegan, Gillian	Robinson, Gavin
Bhatti, Saqib	Fabricant, Michael	Knight, rh Sir Greg	Rowley, Lee
Blunt, Crispin	Farris, Laura	Kruger, Danny	Russell, Dean
Bone, Mr Peter	Fell, Simon (<i>Proxy vote cast by Christopher Pincher</i>)	Kwarteng, rh Kwasi	Rutley, David
Bowie, Andrew	Fletcher, Katherine	Lamont, John	Saxby, Selaine
Bradley, Ben	Fletcher, Mark	Largan, Robert	Scully, Paul
Bradley, rh Karen	Fletcher, Nick	Latham, Mrs Pauline	Seely, Bob
Brady, Sir Graham	Ford, Vicky	Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea	Selous, Andrew
Braverman, rh Suella	Foster, Kevin	Levy, Ian	Shannon, Jim
Brereton, Jack	Fox, rh Dr Liam	Lewer, Andrew	Shapps, rh Grant
Bridgen, Andrew	Francois, rh Mr Mark	Lewis, rh Brandon	Sharma, rh Alok
Brine, Steve	Frazer, rh Lucy	Lewis, rh Dr Julian	Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Britcliffe, Sara	French, Mr Louie	Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian	Simmonds, David
Browne, Anthony	Fuller, Richard	Lockhart, Carla	Skidmore, rh Chris
Bruce, Fiona	Gale, rh Sir Roger	Loder, Chris	Smith, Chloe
Buchan, Felicity	Garnier, Mark	Logan, Mark	Smith, Greg
Burghart, Alex	Ghani, Ms Nusrat	Lopez, Julia	Smith, Henry
Butler, Rob	Gibb, rh Nick	Loughton, Tim	Smith, rh Julian
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Gideon, Jo	Mackinlay, Craig	Smith, Royston
Carter, Andy	Girvan, Paul	Mackrory, Cherilyn	Spencer, rh Mark
Cartlidge, James	Glen, John	Maclean, Rachel	Stafford, Alexander
Cash, Sir William	Graham, Richard	Malthouse, rh Kit	Stephenson, Andrew
Cates, Miriam	Grant, Mrs Helen	Mangnall, Anthony	Stevenson, Jane
Caulfield, Maria	Gray, James	Mann, Scott	Stevenson, John
Chalk, Alex	Grayling, rh Chris	Marson, Julie	Stewart, rh Bob
Chishti, Rehman	Green, Chris	May, rh Mrs Theresa	Stewart, Iain
Chope, Sir Christopher	Green, rh Damian	Maynard, Paul	Streeter, Sir Gary
Churchill, Jo	Griffith, Andrew	McCartney, Jason	Stride, rh Mel
Clark, rh Greg	Griffiths, Kate	McCartney, Karl	Stuart, Graham
Clarke, rh Mr Simon	Grundy, James	McPartland, Stephen	Sunak, rh Rishi
Clarke, Theo	Gullis, Jonathan (<i>Proxy vote cast by Christopher Pincher</i>)	McVey, rh Esther	Sunderland, James
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Halfon, rh Robert	Mercer, Johnny	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Clarkson, Chris	Hall, Luke	Merriman, Huw	Syms, Sir Robert
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Hammond, Stephen	Millar, Robin	Thomas, Derek
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse	Hands, rh Greg	Miller, rh Mrs Maria	Throup, Maggie
Colburn, Elliot	Harper, rh Mr Mark	Milling, rh Amanda	Tolhurst, Kelly
Collins, Damian	Harris, Rebecca	Mills, Nigel	Tomlinson, Justin
Costa, Alberto	Harrison, Trudy	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew	Tomlinson, Michael
Courts, Robert	Hart, Sally-Ann	Mohindra, Mr Gagan	Tracey, Craig
Coutinho, Claire	Hayes, rh Sir John	Moore, Damien	Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Heald, rh Sir Oliver	Moore, Robbie	Trott, Laura
Crosbie, Virginia	Heaton-Harris, rh Chris	Mordaunt, rh Penny	Tugendhat, Tom
Crouch, Tracey	Henderson, Gordon	Morris, Anne Marie	Vara, Shailesh
Daly, James	Henry, Darren	Morris, David	Vickers, Martin
Davies, David T. C.	Higginbotham, Antony	Morrissey, Joy	Villiers, rh Theresa
Davies, Gareth	Hinds, rh Damian	Morton, Wendy	Walker, Sir Charles
Davies, Dr James	Hoare, Simon	Mullan, Dr Kieran	Walker, Mr Robin
Davies, Mims	Holden, Mr Richard	Mumby-Croft, Holly	Wallis, Dr Jamie
Davies, Philip	Hollinrake, Kevin	Mundell, rh David	Warburton, David
Davis, rh Mr David	Hollobone, Mr Philip	Murray, Mrs Sheryll	Warman, Matt
Davison, Dehenna	Holmes, Paul	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew	Webb, Suzanne
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Howell, John	Neill, Sir Robert	Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Huddlestone, Nigel	Nici, Lia	Whittaker, Craig
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.		Nokes, rh Caroline	Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Donelan, rh Michelle		Norman, rh Jesse	Wiggin, Sir Bill

Wild, James
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wragg, Mr William

Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Amanda Solloway and
Alan Mak

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, rh Jonathan
Barker, Paula
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begum, Apsana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackford, rh Ian
Blake, Olivia
Blomfield, Paul
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Ms Lyn
Bryant, Chris
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, Ian
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chamberlain, Wendy
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, rh Yvette
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela
Creasy, Stella
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Daby, Janet
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Geraint
Davies-Jones, Alex
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doogan, Dave
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, Maria
Eastwood, Colum

Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farry, Stephen
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Flynn, Stephen
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Green, Kate
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hanna, Claire
Hanvey, Neale
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hendry, Drew
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Rachel
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz (*Proxy vote cast*
by Chris Elmore)
Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris

Leadbeater, Kim
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
Mc Nally, John
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McLaughlin, Anne
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Mishra, Navendu
Moran, Layla
Morgan, Helen
Morgan, Stephen
Murray, Ian
Murray, James
Newlands, Gavin
Nichols, Charlotte
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Onwurah, Chi
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Oswald, Kirsten
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillipson, Bridget
Pollard, Luke
Qaisar, Ms Anum
Qureshi, Yasmin

Rayner, rh Angela
Reed, Steve
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shah, Naz
Sheppard, Tommy
Smith, Alyn
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Richard
Timms, rh Stephen
Turner, Karl
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Munira
Winter, Beth
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Jessica Morden and
Lilian Greenwood

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendments 1, 3 and 5 to 12 agreed to, with Commons financial privileges waived in respect of Lords amendments 1, 3 and 5 to 12.

Ordered, That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendments 2 and 4;

That Lucy Frazer, Alan Mak, Rob Butler, Claire Coutinho, James Murray, Liz Twist and Richard Thomson be members of the Committee;

That Lucy Frazer be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—
(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Question agreed to.

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

Public Health

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Self-Isolation etc.) (Revocation) (England) Regulations 2022 (SI, 2022, No. 161), dated 22 February 2022, a copy of which was laid before this House on 22 February, be approved.—(*Maggie Throup.*)

6.50 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In the light of these really important regulations and the protections they have provided for so long, I believe it is important to scrutinise the Minister on how we will maintain public safety as we move forward, in particular for vulnerable groups who have had protections during the pandemic. For instance, there is currently no guidance in place for visitors to care homes or staff working in care homes. It would be helpful to hear from the Minister how she is going to handle that, as well as any outbreak of covid, and what forms of test and trace will be in place to address those issues.

6.51 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The all-party parliamentary group on coronavirus took evidence this morning from SAGE—the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies—academics and clinicians. They were clear in their concern that the living with coronavirus strategy does not include what needs to happen. It tells us what needs to stop, but it does not say what needs to happen. I am thinking particularly about the surveillance of new variants and the impacts on the communities that will be most detrimentally affected. Will the Minister expand on how the Government will ensure they keep us safe?

6.51 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I was also at the all-party parliamentary group on coronavirus evidence session this morning and the health experts were unanimous in saying that to remove the restrictions around self-isolation right now is premature. They were all concerned about the impact it would have on the 3.7 million clinically vulnerable people. If people cannot test and they are not self-isolating, they may well sit next to somebody in a train carriage who is extremely vulnerable. They will not know that that person is extremely vulnerable and they will not be taking any precautions.

We ought to ensure that we retain the requirement to self-isolate. It is one of the most basic measures we have to protect other people. When it comes to personal responsibility, we do not say that, for example, speed limits are a question of personal responsibility or that smoking in crowded places is a personal responsibility, because they affect other people. That is exactly the point with these regulations. Self-isolation is to protect others and therefore simply relying on self-responsibility is not enough.

6.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): First, I would like to outline that the House has been asked to revoke the legal requirements around self-isolation if one tests

positive for covid-19, including: the duty to self-isolate if one tests positive, the duty to provide NHS Test and Trace with details and contacts, the duty to notify an employer that one is self-isolating, and the legal duty on employers to not knowingly allow someone who is self-isolating to attend work. Rather than relying on restrictions, we are encouraging people to act responsibly and to follow the guidance that has been set out, just as we would for any other respiratory condition.

To answer some of the specific questions raised by Opposition Members, as announced on 21 February, we will continue to make testing available for a small number of at-risk groups. We are considering which groups will be eligible for tests after provision for the general public ends. Tests are available until the end of March. We will announce details as soon as we can. That addresses the specific questions asked about people in vulnerable settings.

As for how we are moving forward, the Government will retain surveillance to monitor the virus, understand its evolution and identify changes and new characteristics. That will enable the Government to make informed decisions and respond accordingly. The Government will prepare and maintain the capabilities to ramp up testing and other tools such as laboratory infrastructure to be used as the line of defence against new variants.

Finally, I remind the House that we have already sent out 1.3 million PCR tests to those who are clinically extremely vulnerable, so that should they find that they have symptoms, they can do an immediate PCR test, have priority and be able to be prescribed antivirals as a matter of urgency.

Question put and agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee in respect of the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before it has been read a second time.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Business without Debate

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With the leave of the House, I will put motions 8 and 9 together.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Cumbria (Structural Changes) Order 2022, which was laid before this House on 24 January, be approved.

ROAD TRAFFIC

That the draft Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) (Amendment) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 24 January, be approved.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Great British Railways headquarters

6.55 pm

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): The petition states to the Government and Lancashire County Council:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Carnforth would be an ideal location for the new headquarters of Great British Railways; further that the creation of the headquarters would bring additional jobs to the community, as well as encourage new investment; further that Lancashire County Council should note the importance of this proposal; and further that an initial petition organised by Lancaster Civic Vision gained 220 signatories from the whole community.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to note the nomination of Carnforth to house the new headquarters of Great British Railways.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002714]

Sodium valproate

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I rise to present a petition to the House of Commons from the residents of the United Kingdom on sodium valproate. This petition has been instigated by my constituent Janet Williams, who joins us in the Public Gallery this evening, along with Emma Murphy. They are long-time campaigners on the issue of sodium valproate in pregnancy, which has affected many children and caused a great many birth defects. The petition aims to raise awareness of the Cumberlege review, written by Baroness Julia Cumberlege, which found that the use of sodium valproate in pregnancy has been linked to an increased risk of developmental problems, spina bifida, cleft palate, limb defects and other serious birth defects.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government immediately implement, in full, every recommendation in the Cumberlege Review.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that many families have been greatly and negatively impacted by the use of sodium valproate in pregnancy which has impacted many children for the rest of their lives; and notes that the Cumberlege Review, written by Baroness Julia Cumberlege, found that the use of sodium valproate in pregnancy has been linked to an increased risk of developmental problems, spina bifida, hare lip, cleft palate, limb defects and other serious birth defects.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government immediately implement, in full, every recommendation in the Cumberlege Review.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002715]

Benefit Cap

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Michael Tomlinson.)

6.58 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith). In opening this debate, I place on record my sincere thanks to Mr Speaker and his team for granting tonight's debate and particularly for being so kind as to reschedule it after I contracted covid-19.

The Minister and I, by virtue of he being a Tory and me not, will disagree on virtually everything about social security policy. However, there is a serious point: in the light of what is happening in Ukraine at the moment, we should reflect on the fact that as much as we can disagree on things, we live in a democracy. I know that he will join me tonight in paying tribute to all our friends in Ukraine and in standing very much in solidarity with them.

I rise tonight to make the case for scrapping the cap, and in particular to pay tribute to the Poverty Alliance for the campaign it has been leading on this. Its campaign has emphasised the impact of the benefit cap as it pushes families into poverty and hardship, having a disproportionate effect on single mothers and ethnic minority families in particular. In speaking tonight, I want to set out why the SNP, as well as countless others in civic society, want to see an end to the unfair and disastrous benefit cap.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Michael Tomlinson.)

David Linden: Ever since its introduction in 2013, the benefit cap has limited the support that some of the most vulnerable people in our constituencies receive. Based on the latest figures from the Department for Work and Pensions, as of August 2021, 180,000 households have had their benefits capped, including over 6,400 households in Scotland, and are receiving on average £54 per week less in support than they would if the cap was not in place.

Perhaps the most counterproductive aspect of the cap is the fact that the people who require the highest level of support are the most likely to be affected, which is not only unjust but simply does not make sense. Why reduce the amount of support that the most vulnerable people in our society require? On top of that, the vast majority of households affected by the cap are exempt from working to increase their income, either because they have a disability or because they have childcare responsibilities. It is a Catch-22 situation for so many people on benefits: they are unable to work to increase their income and they have their benefits cut regardless.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Is my hon Friend, my good friend, as concerned as I am that having the benefit cap in place is leading to—he has outlined the figures—an increase in food insecurity across these islands, and that the pressures on food banks, pantries and citizen supermarkets will be immense because of the actions of the Government?

David Linden: Absolutely. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who I know is a trustee of Feeding Britain and has the Threehills Community trust in his constituency. He is right, and he sees at first hand the food poverty that exists in our communities needlessly as a result of the poor social security policy emanating from Whitehall. The Feeding Britain charity, which he is on, and local organisations in his constituency are very much at the sharp end of that, and I hope that the Minister will reflect on that.

It should be noted that benefit capped households in receipt of universal credit have also largely not benefited from the £20 increase to universal credit during the pandemic. The benefit cap remained in place, which meant that universal credit claimants who had already reached the cap saw no increase in the support they received, and even more households were affected by the cap as the universal credit increase pushed them to the cap's limit. On top of all that, and very much to add insult to injury, the cap does not increase to reflect increasing costs of living.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I fully support what he has been saying. Does he not agree that in the current economic climate the power of the pound is so massively reduced that, while benefits may once have helped pay substantially for additional costs, the same amount goes nowhere near to meeting needs today? If that is the case, the hon. Gentleman is correct that there is clearly a need to reassess the cap entirely, and for that reason I fully support what he is proposing.

David Linden: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for his intervention. It is almost as though he had seen my speech, but that may not be the case. I like to think that he is the Mystic Meg of Strangford. But he is absolutely right and makes a serious point, which, in the context of the cost of living crisis, is a massive issue. He has very much put that on record for his constituents in Strangford, who I know will be incredibly proud of him.

The problem with the benefit cap is that it is in effect a cut in real terms each year. As we face the cost of living crisis that the hon. Member spoke about, benefit claimants will see their costs go up while their incomes continue to be capped. The benefit cap has profound impacts on the people affected by it. For many families it means insecurity and anxiety, poor mental health, an inability to afford essentials such as food and heating, and reliance on food banks. It has also forced many of the constituents of SNP Members into problem debt.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Will my hon. Friend give way?

David Linden: I will give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady).

Patrick Grady: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Is it not exactly the point that if people cannot afford basic necessities—food, heating their homes—because of the benefit cap, that stores up

greater costs for the state in the longer term because of the health costs and the other social difficulties that may arise, even later in life, such as for the 173 children in the Glasgow North constituency who are hit by the benefit cap?

David Linden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to put that on record, because he is right to identify the point that destitution ultimately comes at a cost to the state. I am incredibly proud that the Scottish Government have a focus on a preventive spending agenda. The Government should realise that if we push people into debt and financial insecurity, we end up with a situation, as my hon. Friend will have seen in Glasgow, where people are essentially made homeless because they do not have enough money, and that then results in a section 5 referral to the local authority and the state still has to pick up the costs as a result. My hon. Friend is exactly right to make that point, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) will be just as eloquent.

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend has been talking about the impact that people face from the benefit cap across the piece, but there is an even greater impact for those who live in rural areas—particularly those off the gas grid—where, for example, petrol costs are higher, travel costs are higher and incomes are often lower across the piece, so families will struggle together. The benefit cap is punishing those people even more than those in cities with lower costs.

David Linden: Absolutely, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend on that, because he presented a 10-minute rule Bill on this issue in the Chamber last week. I know it affects his constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara). In a lot of these rural constituencies, people are off-grid, and it means they will have increased energy costs. Having some sort of arbitrary benefit cap in place will not help them, so I ask those on the Treasury Bench to reflect on the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey and to bring forward the opportunity for it to get its Second Reading and for him to give his constituents a voice.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The hon. Member is making a very strong case. He is absolutely right to focus on the benefit cap and the impact that has on 180,000-odd households. Does he agree that it needs to be looked at in the context of the £34 billion a year that has been taken out of support for working-age families? Do we also need to be considering the adequacy overall of social security support?

David Linden: Yes, my fundamental position is that we need a root-and-branch review of the social security system. That safety net that is supposed to exist for some of the most marginalised and vulnerable people in our communities is a safety net that has more holes than a clarinet at the moment. I gently make a point to the hon. Member and her party. Yes, we need that real reform of social security—not the reform that we have from the Government, where basically the lion is in charge of the abattoir—where we look at ensuring that we give as much support to people as possible. That is why I would like to see the next Labour manifesto

commit to abolishing the welfare cap. I was disappointed that Labour MPs were not able to join us in the Lobby on that, but I am sure that the hon. Member will be making that point to the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer).

With the cost of living crisis already impacting on thousands of families in Glasgow East, alongside the continuing financial effect of the pandemic, Brexit and now the regressive hike in national insurance, I have to ask the Minister: when will this Tory Government realise that all they are doing is pushing more and more people into poverty? The benefit cap disproportionately impacts single parents, placing an additional burden on families who already face challenges. Based on the latest Department for Work and Pensions figures for August 2021, across the UK six in 10 households that have had their benefit capped are single-parent families.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that the disproportionate impact of the benefit cap on larger families is also particularly problematic, given the comments he has just made about the cost of living crisis and the increasingly difficult situations that many families are facing?

David Linden: Absolutely. That is an issue I will perhaps touch on a little later in my speech. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to challenge the Government on that point, because I sometimes wonder how a policy like this could have got through the Government's so-called family test. I am sure she will not hesitate in challenging her constituency MSP, the Conservative MSP Jackson Carlaw, to stand up for his constituents, many of whom have larger families.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): On that point, is it not key that we are talking about families and children? Whatever the Tories' ideological views on people having too many children, the reality is that the benefit cap is affecting children who have no say in the matter, and it is evil.

David Linden: Absolutely; my hon. Friend makes that point eloquently. The issue is that the Government are making policy in their ivory towers in Whitehall without any understanding of the real-life impact that it has on many families, including in Kilmarnock.

Some nine out of 10 single parents with children are women, which adds another layer of discrimination to an already incredibly cruel policy. We have heard testimonies from women who have left relationships due to domestic abuse only to find their benefits capped and the threat of financial hardship looming. That is the reality of the policy. Every effort should be made to ensure that those women, who are often fleeing desperate situations, are supported. Instead, the heartless British Government have capped the benefits that they can receive.

On top of that clear discrimination against single parents, specifically single mothers, a 2018 report by the excellent charities One Parent Families Scotland and CPAG in Scotland revealed that most families whose benefits had been capped were unable to seek or undertake work. The report highlighted that almost four in five lone parent households affected by the cap were claiming income support because they had young children and

were not expected to seek work. Some one in six were claiming employment and support allowance, which suggests that they had been assessed as not fit for work. Families across Scotland are being pushed into financial hardship when they are not expected, and indeed are not deemed fit, to find work.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that the benefit cap also disproportionately affects minority ethnic households. In England, eight in 20 households affected by the cap are minority ethnic, while minority ethnic households represent only three in 20 of the total. The Poverty Alliance has shown that the benefit cap discriminates against larger families as well, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) said. In Scotland, 96% of capped households have children and of that number, 75% have three or more children.

According to a recent Resolution Foundation report, the low level of core social security benefits, which were affected by the various real-terms cuts to benefit levels in the 2010s, has been exacerbated in the past decade by policy changes such as the benefit cap and the two-child limit and associated rape clause that have undermined the idea that those with extra needs should be supported. That has resulted in rising poverty, particularly among families with three or more children.

The SNP has put forward clear policies to tackle poverty across Scotland. For example, my colleagues, SNP Ministers in Holyrood, have doubled the game-changing Scottish child payment, rolled out 11 new benefits and extended free school meals, and are working to actively reduce poverty and inequality. All the while, this place—Westminster—undermines those efforts.

With limited tax-raising powers, no serious borrowing powers and 85% of welfare spending still controlled in London, however, those policies can only go so far. They are being continually undermined by a Tory Government that Scotland did not elect; indeed, we have not elected a Tory Government since the 1950s. The benefit cap is just another cruel policy implemented by the Tories that leads to the extreme austerity and poverty that blight the lives of far too many of our constituents.

In addition to the benefit cap, the British Government must also scrap other poverty-inducing Tory policies such as the two-child limit and the bedroom tax. We face a perverse situation where the Scottish Government have to use between £60 million and £80 million of their budget every year to mitigate the bedroom tax. Again, devolution is almost being used as a sticking plaster for bad social security policy. Quite simply, I am sick and tired of standing up in this Chamber and making endless pleas to intransigent Tory Ministers while trying to demonstrate how my constituents in Wellhouse, Easthall and Cranhill are suffering from their cruel social security squeeze.

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend is being generous with his time. He is about to make a point about people suffering. Does he agree that either there is no recognition from the Government Benches of the hardship and suffering that people are going through and facing more of, or they are willing to let it happen by not taking the actions that they need to take?

David Linden: It is a question on which I find myself reflecting an awful lot. We all come into politics for different reasons. As I outlined at the beginning of this

[David Linden]

debate, the Minister and I have very different ideological views on the merits of the social security system and perhaps, even in his case, on what role the state should have in people's lives. We are all constituency MPs, and on Friday morning we will go back to our constituencies and sit in those cold, draughty community centres and talk to people who are impacted by these policies. I find it very difficult to believe that the Minister, who represents Macclesfield, does not have constituents coming to him and saying that the benefit cap is putting them in a very difficult position. This may be a case of Ministers focusing too much on policy, but in this instance I think it is a case of Ministers, and indeed the Government, not focusing enough on their day job or on the correspondence that they receive from their constituents, which overwhelmingly says that the benefit cap must go.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful case as to why the benefit cap must go. One thing that we have not discussed is the pandemic, which has affected so many families in Scotland and right across the UK. I think that it is 88% of households in Renfrewshire that have been affected by the benefit cap. Does that very fact not highlight the callousness of this policy and the fact that it needs to go?

David Linden: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is a doughty champion of the children of Renfrewshire. This is a topic that we discuss regularly in our policy teams. He is right to place on record the extreme challenges that that poses to his constituents. I am sure that his constituents will reflect on the fact that the only way of ensuring that we do not have things like the benefit cap is to secure the powers of Scottish independence.

I was saying how often it feels like groundhog day in Westminster. While we on these Benches are focused on the people of Scotland, the Tories are far too focused on naval gazing and internal party politics. Indeed, the Chancellor seems more interested in preparing his suite of Instagram graphics for his next leadership bid than resourcing appropriately our social security system.

The fact of the matter is that the entire system is in desperate need of reform—reform that the Tories will not implement because it does not fit their political game of pitting people against each other in our community. While 85% of welfare policy remains reserved to the Westminster Government, we should only expect further policies that encourage poverty and austerity. From where I am standing, it is clearer than ever that the only way to protect Scotland's interests and to build that fair and equal society that we all want to see is for Scotland to become a normal independent country. I am absolutely clear that we are on that path and that we will get there, but there is recognition, even on these Benches, that it will not happen overnight. That is why Ministers must act now, and that is why Ministers must scrap the cap.

7.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (David Rutley): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing the debate. I know that he has strong views on this issue—that is very clear from the debate. This was second time

lucky for him in terms of having this debate, which is thanks to the Chair and the Speaker. I am really pleased that he was able to get through his coronavirus unscathed, hopefully, and is now able to participate. I am also grateful to him for mentioning how important these democratic processes are, however much we might disagree—as he and I do on a lot. None the less, this is the way to express our differences—through debate and through the democratic processes. This stands in marked contrast to the unacceptable and abhorrent actions of President Putin, which both he and I roundly condemn, along with the whole House. Our thoughts and prayers are with the people of Ukraine and for peace.

The Government remain committed to providing a financial safety net for those who need it, with support available for those on low incomes or who are unable to work at all. We will, this year, spend more than £250 billion through the welfare system, including £41 billion on universal credit and more than £110 billion on working age benefits. The Government have focused on making sure that more money gets to those vulnerable people who need it most, with over £58 billion of welfare support going to people with disabilities and health conditions this year alone.

The pandemic has been a very challenging time for many, and universal credit has stood up to the challenge of covid-19, providing a vital safety net for 6 million people. I know that the hon. Gentleman has concerns about universal credit, but the system stood up well; it was resilient and it was able to pay people on time.

David Linden: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Yes, like everybody on these Benches, I welcome the fact that the universal credit payment was uplifted by £20 a week, but does he not accept that that was a clear concession and recognition that social security in its current form was inadequate before the pandemic, and if it was inadequate then, what has changed since?

David Rutley: As the Chancellor spelled out clearly during the pandemic, this was a response to the worst parts of the pandemic and the shock it would provide to people. The hard-working staff in the Department for Work and Pensions, including thousands of work coaches, worked tirelessly to ensure that the benefits system did its job.

Since the start of the pandemic, we have spent more than £400 billion protecting people's lives and livelihoods, and supporting businesses and public services. As well as providing support where it is needed, the Government have a responsibility to taxpayers. We must ensure that we use our resources in the most effective and efficient way possible, and the benefit cap is a vital part of that.

The hon. Gentleman and I probably disagree on this, but let me set it out and we will see how it takes the debate further forward.

Alan Brown: It is a few years since the National Audit Office said that there was no system in place to measure the outcomes associated with universal credit. For years the Government have continued to say that UC helps people into work. So what changes in the assessment process for measuring outcomes have the Government made since that NAO report?

David Rutley: The internal assessments we have produced—and we have produced several—showed that UC does help more people get into work. At the moment, in an economic environment where there are record vacancies, which I will touch on later, we are helping more people get into work.

The benefit cap was introduced as part of a strategy to reform the system of benefits for people of working age. The cap limits the combined sum of prescribed welfare benefits that households may be entitled to. The aims of the benefit cap policy are: to incentivise behaviours; to encourage people to work and to reduce long-term dependency on benefits; and to introduce greater fairness in the welfare system between those receiving out-of-work benefits and those in work, by putting in place a reasonable limit on the amount a household can receive in welfare benefits. For context, let me say that about four in 10 households earn less than the annual benefit cap's limits of £23,000 in London and about £20,000 in the rest of Great Britain. The final aim is to make the system more affordable, better balancing the burden on taxpayers. Let us not forget that households can still receive benefits up to the equivalent salary of £24,000—or £28,000 in London.

We continue to protect vulnerable claimants for whom work may not currently be a viable option. In recognition of the additional costs related to a disability, households are exempt from the cap if someone is receiving disability living allowance or a personal independence payment. UC claimants who receive the limited capability for work-related activity element—that phrase is a bit of a mouthful—or employment and support allowance claimants in receipt of the support component are also exempt from the cap.

The Government recognise and appreciate the vital contribution made by carers, which is why there are exemptions for those entitled to carer's allowance, the carer's element in UC and guardian's allowance. Households in receipt of UC are exempt from the cap if their earnings reach just £617 a month, to help encourage people into work. Those who still receive housing benefit are also exempt if they are entitled to working tax credits. Eligible childcare costs that are repaid through UC payments are exempt from the cap. That also supports people getting into work and progressing in employment.

I also want to support those with a strong recent work history who find themselves without work or whose earnings reduce. As a result, the benefit cap is not applied for nine months for those receiving UC where the claimant, their partner or ex-partner has received at least the benefit cap earnings threshold of £617 in each of the previous 12 consecutive months.

I should also remind the House that the proportion of capped households remains low in comparison with the overall working-age benefit case load, at 2.7% across Great Britain. In Scotland, the proportion is even lower, at 1.1%. In the last quarter, to August 2021, on average 710 households every week moved off the cap through increasing their earnings or starting work. There is a statutory duty to review the benefit cap levels once in each Parliament; the country has been through very challenging times, which has delayed that statutory review, but it will happen at the appropriate time in this Parliament, to be determined by the Secretary of State. When the Secretary of State decides to undertake that

review, which must currently happen by December 2024, she will consider the national economic situation and any other matters she deems vital at that time.

Chris Stephens *rose*—

David Rutley: I will give way to the esteemed member of the Work and Pensions Committee.

Chris Stephens: The Minister is being very generous. Can he tell us then, with the assessments the Department is doing of the benefit cap, whether it will do further assessments alongside its much-awaited review on the drivers of food bank use and food aid provision, which the House has waited 18 months for the Department to place in the Commons Library?

David Rutley: That report will come forward—I think there have been exchanges between the Committee and the Secretary of State's office—but we are talking here about a statutory requirement, which certainly will happen during the course of this Parliament. As the hon. Gentleman, a well-respected member of the Committee, will be aware, we have gone through very uncertain times; we must ensure that review is done when we have the proper body of evidence and at the right time. I am sure he will seek to hold the Secretary of State to account during that process, as he rightly should as a member of the Select Committee.

There is clear evidence that work, particularly full-time work, substantially reduces the likelihood of being in poverty. Children living in workless households were around six times more likely to be in absolute poverty before housing costs in 2019-20 than those where all adults worked. At a time of record vacancies, we are not only focusing on getting people into jobs, but taking action to boost the take-home pay of lower-income working households by giving nearly 2 million families an extra £1,000 a year through our cut—

David Linden: Cut to universal credit.

David Rutley: Through our cut to the universal credit taper rate, if I may finish, and the increase in work allowances. The hon. Gentleman is being incredibly cheeky, but we will let him get away with it once. In addition, the national living wage will increase to £9.50 from April, meaning an extra £1,000 a year for full-time workers.

Getting claimants back into work remains the primary focus of the Secretary of State and the whole ministerial team, myself included. We know that having a job has many benefits, including a routine, a sense of purpose and increased confidence. We would also like as many people as possible to feel those positive effects—not forgetting, of course, that people on UC securing employment will significantly decrease the likelihood of their household's being affected by the cap.

There are nearly 1.3 million vacancies across the United Kingdom, 43,000 more than last month and 513,000 more than at the start of the pandemic. Those vacancies provide opportunities for people to move into and progress in work, as well as to increase their earnings. To help people to take advantage of that record number of vacancies, our plan for jobs is supporting people at any age and any stage of their career. People currently affected by the benefit cap can access support provided

[David Rutley]

by the “Plan for Jobs”, and since the start of the pandemic we have recruited 13,500 new work coaches to ensure that, no matter where they live across the country, claimants can access support and opportunities to get a job, to progress and to realise their potential.

David Linden: The point I want to pick the Minister up on is that, if the Government have put in place all those work coaches—I pay tribute to the work they do—and they all have contracts that go on longer because there is anticipation that the unemployment figures will be higher, why did they cut universal credit when they understood that people were going to be relying on the social security system?

David Rutley: I know the hon. Gentleman likes to put the word “cut” into a sentence, but we withdrew a temporary increase in universal credit that was put in place for a specific reason during the pandemic. We have now got into a stage in the economic cycle where there are more vacancies and we want to get people into work so they can stand on their own two feet and be less dependent on benefits. I know we have different views, but I am sure even he would want to get more people standing on their own two feet and given the opportunity to have their own work.

Another way we are doing that is by working with a specific group of 500,000 benefit claimants, helping them into work by the end of June through the way to work initiative, which will increase communication between employers and claimants to help get people into work faster, so that they can experience the positive benefits associated with it. There is a range of other support available to help those people who may be affected by the cap through the flexible support fund, ensuring they have access to higher support for childcare—up to 85% of the cost of which is available on universal credit—and through the discretionary housing payments and, of course, the household support fund.

It is not just helping people into work; we have also provided support. The Chancellor set out just recently the additional support that would be available to tackle the cost of energy through the three-part plan, involving a £200 rebate for households that is delivered through their energy bill. We have covered a lot in this debate; we are very keen to help people into work and we are providing support for those who face challenges. I thank Mr Speaker for the opportunity to address this debate.

7.30 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 1 March 2022

[JUDITH CUMMINS *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Pensions Guidance and Advice

[*Relevant document: Fifth Report of the Work and Pensions Committee, Protecting pension savers—five years on from the Pension Freedoms: Accessing pension savings, HC 237*]

9.30 am

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered take-up of pensions guidance and advice.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummings. I thank colleagues for turning up after we had a late night last night. We have picked a day when pensions are topical, as we have a tube strike over the very issue that we are talking about.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Not my fault.

Nigel Mills: It is not the Minister's fault on this occasion.

I do not think the main topic that I am proposing today is one that divides us. I think we would all accept that the problem is that we have a hugely complex pension system. Most people do not really have any understanding of how it works or what their options are, and far too few end up receiving advice or guidance before taking difficult decisions, having probably saved for 30, 40 or more years. They get to the end point and, sadly, do not always understand what they are doing. The huge risk of that situation is that they make a terrible mistake that they could have avoided, which has a detrimental impact on their retirement and reduces their quality of life in their last few years. The real question is what we can do to improve that situation.

We are not here today to talk about the level of pension saving, which is a hugely important topic but one for a different day. We are talking about what we can do to help people who get to the end of their saving journey to get the outcome that they want—the best outcome that they can have with the money that they have. I am not here to criticise auto-enrolment, which has been a huge success. It has hugely improved the situation for many people in work and at least gives them something to worry about when they get to retirement, whereas that would not have been a problem a decade ago. Millions of people would not even have had a pension pot to be thinking about.

Equally, I am not here to criticise the pension freedoms reforms that took place almost exactly seven years ago, which have been a huge success and are hugely welcome. In its recent report, the Works and Pensions Committee accepted that they should stay in place. However, we have to accept that we have a contradiction between the two systems and that we have chosen a way to get people to save pensions by almost tricking them into it, so that they do not realise. They just get defaulted in and do not have to engage, although we wish they

would. At the end of that, we now have a hugely complicated system with lots of choices that people are not prepared for, and we need to find a way to prepare them for that, either at some point in their saving journey or when they get to retirement.

This is a problem that is actually getting worse. Statistics show that fewer people than before have taken advice over the last years, and the problem is getting worse because we have more and more people reaching retirement who will not have any defined benefit pension that can provide the majority of their retirement income. In order to ensure their quality of life in retirement, more and more people will be relying on their defined contribution savings and on the decision they make when they hit the age of 50 and get the chance to take a lump sum. It looks like a hugely attractive way to solve their present financial woes, but they do not realise that it makes their future woes a lot worse, having lost a quarter of what they had, which probably was not enough in the first place.

During the pandemic, a lot more working people over a certain age have now decided that they actually quite like being furloughed and have wondered whether they can eke out their retirement savings over a longer period by using the lump sum and not going back to work. It may be a terribly bad decision that they are making. I think the Government are now waking up to the fact that we have lost hundreds of thousands of people from the workforce who could come back but who would quite like not to do so. I am sure we would all like to be able to afford to retire early, but not if that gives us huge financial problems in later life.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's comments about the importance of pension savings and for his very serious approach to this issue. Does he agree that there is a contradiction here with what the Prime Minister has said about the growth in employment? He may have been somewhat mistaken and inadvertently given a misleading impression that the number of staff on payrolls has increased, but the overall size of the workforce has dropped, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned.

Nigel Mills: Yes, I think that is right: employment has grown, but participation has reduced. I have spent many years arguing about whether people are in fake self-employment—not really self-employed but being made to be, or pretending to be, because their employers are being unscrupulous or trying to get a tax advantage. Shifting people who were not really self-employed into thinking that they are employed is quite a good outcome—it makes the data more reasonable. The hon. Gentleman is right: we have lost hundreds of thousands of people who could still be working. When there is a workforce shortage, any measure that could get people from those cohorts back into work would probably be good for the majority of them and for the economy as a whole.

To return to today's topic, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs data tells us that £45 billion was taken from pension pots in the first six years of the pension freedoms policy. Some 3.7 million defined-contribution pensions were accessed in that period, and over 2 million of those pots were cashed in full. This is not a problem for the future when defined-benefit pensions start to run off. It is a situation we have seen over the first

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five years of pension freedoms. It is happening now. Hundreds of thousands of people are accessing their pension pots without knowing what they are really trying to do.

It is worth quickly noting that we still have a problem with the data. The data that we have shows pots being accessed, not pots being accessed by individuals. We do not know whether the data shows one individual accessing 15 different pension pots from 15 different jobs, or 15 different individuals accessing one pension pot each. If we are to have a proper understanding of the situation, we need better data, so that we know what people are doing and what outcomes they are facing. We raised that as a Select Committee on multiple occasions, but we still cannot seem to get that data to be gathered.

The reason for asking for this debate—and what I would quite like the Minister to recognise when he wraps up—is that we have a large problem here. I am sure that the Minister does recognise that; he has said so on many occasions. I would also like the Minister to set out a direction of travel for the regulators and industry. We know that the take-up of pension advice and guidance is far too low—I will come on to the data in a little while. The Minister has made some welcome steps, which will come into force in a few months' time, but even those steps will not fix the problem or take us to anything like the level that we need. I know that we do not like targets or benchmarks, but perhaps the Government could set an aspiration, an indication of what good practice is, or what the level should be. We need to set an aspiration for the regulators as to what the level of take-up of advice and guidance should be, and we need a plan for how we get there. I will talk through a few ideas about how we could bridge that gap.

If Parliament does not set the regulators a target, benchmark or aspiration—call it what you will—they will flounder, flap around and go round in circles. We need to be clear: “Here is where you need to get to, and here is how long you have to get there; if you do not get there, we will have to take some different measures of our own.” We had a problem during the debate on the Pension Schemes Bill last year or the year before. Amendments were tabled that called for various solutions, and the fact that they were not adopted means that people think that Parliament does not actually want them, whereas that is not how parliamentary debates work. We move amendments to float ideas, and we debate them. The fact that they are not voted on does not mean that we did not want them; it just means that we think that there may be other ways to achieve them. I hope that we can send a strong message today.

Guy Opperman: I did warn my hon. Friend that I would quote back to him his exact words from debate on the Pension Schemes Bill. His speech on Second Reading genuinely struck me, and to try to beef up the process I revised the specific guidance largely on the back of what he and the Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), said. My hon. Friend said:

“I personally would prefer a default guidance appointment, with someone having to sign in blood if they really did not want this free, excellent quality guidance before they could access their money.”—[*Official Report*, 16 November 2020; Vol. 684, c. 69.]

With respect, that is exactly what the stronger nudge is. We have taken on board the exact comments he made on Second Reading of the Pension Schemes Bill.

Nigel Mills: I am grateful to the Minister. He did say that he wanted the take-up of pension guidance to be the norm. Even with his changes, which I welcome, the take-up of Pension Wise will increase from a totally inadequate 14% to a really quite unacceptable 22%. I do not know how he defines a norm. I am not sure if there is a written definition of a norm, but I have a feeling that less than a quarter does not count as a norm. In that speech, which I stand by, I said that before they access their pension pot, I want the clear majority of people who have any level of pension savings to have taken guidance or advice.

However, I do not agree that such advice should be mandatory. We cannot put a gun to people's heads and say, “You cannot have your money unless you sit through this. If you refuse to do it, no matter how long it takes, we're not giving you your money.” Clearly, we cannot do that, but we can get pretty close to that situation. We need to find processes, techniques and measures that get that percentage up to somewhere much nearer the norm, so that people are not suffering the harm of doing this without understanding the whole landscape of what they are trying to do.

My big concern is not necessarily that people cannot understand the subject, although it is complicated, but that people do not know that there are all manner of uncertainties out there that they have not thought about. It is the “unknown unknowns” that are the problem here.

The beauty of a pension guidance appointment is that it gives people the chance to understand what they do not know, and then gives them the chance to go and find out what they do want to know so that they can make an informed decision. I am not suggesting that we can fix every problem of engagement through an hour or an hour and a half's pension guidance appointment, but it would give people the tools to get the best possible outcome in their situation.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. Further to his point, the need for clear and impartial guidance becomes even more important given the current levels of fraud. We are seeing people defrauded from their pensions and given very poor advice, which means they lose out on their savings, so having clear and impartial advice becomes even more important.

Nigel Mills: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. It is a sad fact that a small proportion of people, but all too many individuals, have not just made a decision that is not optimal but been tricked into something that has cost them the whole or nearly the whole of what they have saved during their working life, because they did not understand that what they were being promised by the snake oil salesman—the conman—was utterly unachievable.

With some kind of briefing or guidance, they would have had a chance to realise that such an outcome was not possible, that there was no way they would get that kind of return and that such an investment strategy was not remotely sensible. We could have saved them in that

situation. We must try to get as many people as possible to take up this service, so that we can put such protections in place and people will have a chance to know that such schemes are not real.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I agree completely with what the hon. Gentleman says. I know I have probably used words that he maybe would not, but does he share my concern about the Minister's intervention? The Minister effectively said, "I listened to the hon. Member's speech. We are doing a stronger nudge—job done; nothing to worry about." Is that not complacent?

Nigel Mills: I would not use that word. It is a little unfair on the Minister, who has put in place some measures that have not yet come into force, to say that he is being complacent. I urge the Government to see those measures as part of the set of solutions we need.

The Government's role is to set the aspiration for the level of take-up that we need, so we can then judge the success of their policies. It is a slightly strange situation and we had some rather baffling evidence sessions with the regulators during the recent Work and Pensions Committee inquiry. Everybody accepts that the take-up is not high enough and we should do more, but when asked, "What ought take-up to be?" they say that they do not know and do not have a number. So we know that what we have now is not good enough, but we do not know what is good enough, and therefore we cannot tell when we are going to get to good enough.

It is a slightly strange way of running a strategy, an organisation or a service to not know what is good and what you are aiming for, but to start trying to aim for it in the hope that you might get there by luck. We need a direction of travel, and someone to say, "We think the right target is 60%." That is the number we had in our Select Committee finding and it seems quite reasonable. We are not asking for 100%, which would not be practical or useful, but we could set that kind of guide.

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend is talking about guidance on its own, but 55% of pots over £10,000 are accessed after taking guidance or advice, and above £100,000 the figure is 74%. Surely on those two, the stats are better, with respect, than he is purporting to suggest, and we must look at this in the context of some people taking advice as well.

Nigel Mills: Absolutely. We hope that more people will take advice and have a properly informed situation, rather than just relying on guidance, and I accept that we want to look at those two things in aggregate. The problem on the numbers the Minister is quoting is that there is still a huge gap in respect of the, I think, 45% of people who have not had advice or guidance. My fear is that they are the people about whom we are most concerned: those with some retirement savings—not a huge amount, although not a very small amount—for whom, if they do not make the right decision and understand all the parameters they are dealing with, there could be a material impact on their retirement.

Should we worry so much about those with a £1 million pension pot? They are probably the ones who are taking advice in the first place. For people who have really a very small amount, there is probably not much that they will be able to do differently after they have had the

guidance than take it as a lump sum. Are we to think it is okay that we have 45% of people who in the scheme of things have a relatively small amount and who could, by getting this wrong, materially harm their retirement, and that we do not have a plan for how to close that gap? I am not sure that that is a position I would want to take.

This shows that we have a problem here, and we need to find ways to try to fix it. The Minister is getting defensive, but I hope that when he speaks later he will accept that we need to close that gap and that the measures that will come into force in a few months will not be sufficient to close it. We need to look at different ways—

Guy Opperman: I am not being defensive; it is just that I do not think that we can look at this matter solely in the context of stronger nudge. We have to look at it in the context of, obviously, the work done with the pension schemes legislation, with the dashboard coming next year; the accumulation pathway, with collective defined contributions coming in; the awareness campaigns, which we are beginning to boost; simpler statements and so much more. Stronger nudge is just one element of about six to eight measures that we are taking to address the problem that my hon. Friend raises, and I accept that he is right to raise it.

Nigel Mills: I am grateful to the Minister. There is a danger, or there will be if we are not careful, of us starting to disagree on the fundamentals, whereas I thought we had a broad consensus of agreement that we needed to find a way to go further on the issue. Sir Hector Sants chairs the Money and Pensions Service, whose job it is to deliver financial advice and support to people around the country, and even he agrees. Sir Hector said that

"the vast majority of people, left to their own devices, will probably make a poor decision."

The problem we have is that a large number of people—unless we are able to convince them to take some kind of guidance or input—are at risk of making a very poor decision that they will not be able to reverse. This is not like taking out the wrong mortgage, which people can change after two years. If people take out the wrong pension, they are stuck with it for the rest of their life. It is not fixable if someone has bought the wrong product.

I accept that all manner of other moving fields around the pension situation all have to come together, but if the Minister was saying—I am sure he was not—that the combination of a slightly-easier-to-read statement that gets sent out once a year, and which might or might not get sent out at the same point and that has some advantages, and the creation of a dashboard, which we hope people will engage with and look at regularly, will fix the fundamental problem of our having a pensions system that is hugely complicated and that people do not engage with or understand, even though they will have to make a difficult decision at some point, I am not that optimistic that we will get such a level of engagement through people's saving journey that they will not need some input before they make their decision.

When we introduced these freedoms—I was on the Select Committee seven or eight years ago—we said yes to providing those freedoms, but the big ask was, "Are we going to help people on that journey?" I am perhaps

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a little disappointed that the solution that the then Government came up with was the Pension Wise service. At that point, the Government and the regulators expected huge take-up, and we were worried about the service being swamped and unable to cope, but we have found that Pension Wise has exceeded all expectations—except one. The feedback from people who use the scheme is hugely positive, as is its impact on their understanding of the pension landscape and on the decisions they go on to make. The one expectation it has not met has to do with take-up, which is nothing like what it was. In evidence sessions on pension schemes, people were saying that we might get 75% take-up, but we are stuck in the low teens, and the figure has been falling in recent years.

It is slightly incongruous: we introduced a policy of pension freedoms, recognised at the time that the situation would be difficult for people, and put in place a new guidance system to help them. We thought there would be huge take-up, and said that its use should be the norm. A few years on, the position has got worse, and we have more people retiring with only DC pensions—people who need this input. We have this huge gap in take-up, but think that is probably okay, because there are a few things online that people can find. That is a challenge. We need a sense of urgency and direction, so that we can hold the regulators to account for achievement.

I am grateful to all who helped me prepare for this debate and sent me useful briefings, particularly the House of Commons Chamber Engagement Team, which conducted an online survey of people's lived experience. That chimed with what we see in our constituency casework and in evidence to the Select Committees. It is clear that people do not understand the situation and do not feel well informed during their saving journey, and then have problems over time.

One quote is from Charlotte:

"Guidance and advice is not provided in my workplace, unless you are almost at retirement age, which is way too late."

Carole said:

"I have tried researching the information online but I find it very confusing."

Anne, a constituent of mine, said:

"The Government should arrange pension roadshows to assist people with enquiries etc. Employers should hold pension surgeries and ensure guidance is available. There isn't enough signposting and guidance in place."

The evidence is pretty clear: there is a gap, and we need to fix that. What are the solutions? The Minister dragged me into talking about solutions earlier than I had planned; I was articulating the problem. Data on the size of the problem shows that HMRC received about £2 billion more than forecast in the early years of pension freedom as a result of people accessing their pensions. That is likely because people took the whole of their pension, as they now can, and became higher-rate taxpayers for the only time in their working life. That was a hugely foolish decision, giving the taxman 20% of their pension. That would not have happened if the pension had been taken out in a smooth way over years.

I am sure the Government do not want that benefit, but that £2 billion was a third more than was forecast. That suggests that something has gone wrong, and that

people have not been making the wisest decisions. A Nobel-prize-winning economist has described working out what to do with a pension as

"the nastiest, hardest problem in finance".

Nobody knows how long they will live, and many people assume they will live fewer years than they do, and end up with the horrible risk of running out of money.

I will move on to the argument the Minister was keen for us to have about how to improve the take-up of Pension Wise advice, and issuing appointments automatically or by default. I am asking for what the Select Committee asked for in its recent report: for the regulator to undertake trials on how to improve the take-up of pension guidance. We are not asking for tens of hundreds and thousands more appointments, and huge costs. We accept that, even with a stronger nudge, we will not get the figure high enough. We could give people an even stronger nudge and look at some of the options. Those include writing to people when they turn 50 or are approaching state pension age to say, "We have made you an appointment with Pension Wise at half-past three on such a date," and giving them the chance to change the appointment. Or we could go back one step and say, "In six months' time, you'll hit state pension age. Before you can access your pension, you need a Pension Wise appointment. Here is the booking number." There could be other combinations; for example, the pension provider could make planned appointments.

Whatever the trials and the options we look at, we are trying to work out whether giving people an appointment—a real kick—increases take-up, especially in the hard-to-reach groups that are not using the guidance service. I would have thought there were enough good-quality pension schemes out there that are keen to help their members and that would be willing to participate in a trial with the regulator, who could agree the rules and set the parameters. We could do that for a few thousand people on a representative basis.

Emma Hardy: The Treasury Committee got a letter on 16 February from the Financial Conduct Authority about the trials and how they have been designed. I wonder if the hon. Member shares my disappointment that it said,

"We are still in a design phase and have not yet determined all these details. Some of the answers to your questions will depend on further work."

It does not feel as though there is a sense of urgency about the issue.

Nigel Mills: I agree. We had the regulator before the Select Committee, and initially she was quite resistant to do anything beyond giving the stronger nudge that the Minister had provided for, because she did not think Parliament wanted that. We should send the message loud and clear that we want to trial these things and see if they result in higher take-up. None of us would want people at Pension Wise to be sitting around at the end of the phone, waiting for calls, which are not coming in huge numbers, if they were providing something that people really do not want; but people who take these appointments value them, and find them useful. There are all manner of ways that call centres around the country handle unpredictable volume. They know what

the take-up will be, and then plan everything with their staff; they move calls around so that they can handle surges in volume, or manage dips in take-up.

I am not saying to the Minister, “Bring in legislation to require a pension guidance appointment for every single saver approaching retirement. Resource Pension Wise to provide that that. Hey, if no-one turns up, it’s just money being lost.” But let us trial things that go beyond what he has already agreed to do, so that we get the take-up we all think we need. If people are not turning up, we will accept that it does not work. If people are turning up totally unengaged, and are there just because they think they have to be and have not bothered to do any research on their own finances, and it is a completely pointless conversation, we will accept that the automatic appointment system does not work. However, if we find, as I suspect we will, that it boosts take-up among the harder-to-reach people, let us roll it out more widely, because we can demonstrate the value of it. If we do not trial any of these things, we will be sitting here in a few years’ time with more people having suffered detriment, and we will be scrabbling around for ideas. We will not have the evidence, because we will not have trialled anything. That is all I am asking the Minister to do.

Another idea we have for improving the outcome is moving the line when it comes to what is advice and guidance, and giving better guidance to the pension schemes about what they can tell their members—what common-sense information they can give people about their options. I am slightly cautious on the latter point, because one of the arguments in favour of pension freedoms, and one of the big problems with the annuity market, was that savers were just defaulting into buying the annuity from their incumbent pension provider, and were not shopping around and understanding their position. They could have got a far better outcome if they bought an ill health annuity, or if they went to a different provider. I do not think we can say that the solution to this problem is for an incumbent pension scheme to tell members what four default pathways they have, and to see which one they want to pick.

Some kind of independent, impartial input should be available to savers, so that they know they can shop around and look elsewhere. The place that is the main contact with the saver should be able to give them useful information, and should be required to give them more useful information than they already do. We should find a way for the regulators to move the line, change the guidance or give some examples to schemes, or give schemes reassurance that they are not breaking the financial advice regulatory rules when giving people what is basically common-sense advice. That would be hugely helpful. If we can, we should reform the system—that is the best way I can put it—so that people do not have to incur the full cost of regulatory advice, which is usually thousands of pounds, and so that we can give people more tailored, individualised guidance on the best option for them. That would be a huge advantage.

It is clear that simple Pension Wise guidance is not the journey’s end that people want. They want something individualised. We need to find a way of making that easier and cheaper for them to get, while keeping it safe; we do not want people being led into buying a product by what they thought was impartial guidance. Making those improvements could give us a dramatic improvement in the situation.

I have spoken for longer than I was expecting to, so I will conclude my remarks by reiterating that I do not think that this issue divides us. We all recognise that we have a problem. We welcome the measures the Government have taken to improve the situation, but I urge the Minister to accept that he needs to go further. We need the regulators to take more action. I urge them to take up the relatively straightforward and low-cost trial options that are out there, so that we can see if we can get a better outcome, and can get more people using a high-quality, free, low-risk guidance service. There is literally no downside to people using it; it is a crying shame that it is not used more. That is all we want to see from this debate.

[HANNAH BARDELL *in the Chair*]

10.1 am

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Bardell. I will not repeat the excellent points made by the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), but I echo many of them. The need for good pensions advice is real and pressing. Nobody jumps out of bed in the morning wanting to think about their pension—apart from everyone here, of course, who did that this morning. It is not top on their list of priorities, but it really matters.

Pensions advice matters more as we see the impact of the increased cost of living. More pensioners are falling into poverty and having to choose between heating and eating. The need for an adequate pension is even more pressing. My interest in this debate comes primarily from my role on the Treasury Committee, where I have taken a particular interest in this subject. In my intervention on the hon. Member for Amber Valley, I referred to the letter from the Financial Conduct Authority to the Chair of the Select Committee of 16 February about what a stronger nudge could be, and about trials to improve take-up of impartial pensions advice. My only criticism was the sense of a lack of urgency. There was a lot of, “Well, we are still in the design phase,” “We could try this,” and “We could try that.” There was nothing concrete.

One point that I would love the Minister to take away is that we need to push the FCA and say, “We want you to firm this up. What exactly will you do? When will these trials take place? When will you have a deadline for designing them?” It feels as though they are using warm words but not taking concrete action.

Obviously, pension decisions are complex, even for the well-informed saver. I have heard that many of us will end up with four or five pensions before we reach retirement, and people are having to try to work out the best advice when they are dealing with these many different pension pots. Gone are the days when people stayed in one career all their life and then retired. This added complexity really matters. I did a Facebook Live session on the subject and, believe it or not, members of the public did engage and were quite interested in the issue. They were particularly interested in how they find out where their missing pension pots were. That was another question that came up, which shows that people do not truly understand this subject.

As I mentioned in my intervention, the lack of high-quality advice leads to people being defrauded, which is heartbreaking. They are not just receiving poor pensions

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advice; they are being tricked and defrauded. That makes getting impartial advice even more important. We can say to people, “Don’t listen to these charlatans who are trying to steal your pensions. Go to this impartial advice service.” I truly do not think many people know that it is there. The feedback from people who use it is that it is a very positive service that gives really good advice. It makes people feel more informed about how to make their decisions. The difficulty, of course, is that if someone does not know the service is there, they will not go to it for advice, and then they are much more vulnerable to making poor decisions.

I want to mention issues that I will talk a lot about in future: the poverty premium and the hidden costs of poverty, and financial inclusion. It is relevant to mention them in this debate on workplace pensions because the Financial Inclusion Commission estimated in January last year that around 8.5 million workers were excluded from automatic enrolment in workplace pensions because they worked in the gig economy, were part time, and earned too little. Those workers tend to rent their homes, “and will have little in the way of savings or other assets to draw on in retirement...In addition, employees who are eligible for automatic enrolment may not engage because they...don’t feel they can afford to make contributions out of their income”.

That is another of my concerns. I am hearing from residents who are choosing to opt out of pension contributions because of the cost of living. They do not feel they can afford things day to day, so they do not want to continue making pension contributions, and that is a huge worry that brings to the forefront the fact that everybody needs advice when making such decisions.

Nurses tell me that they are opting out of their pensions. I have tried desperately to convince them that the NHS pension is great, and have asked them to please stay in it, but people are deciding to opt out right now. Partly, they do not fully understand the consequences of the decisions that they are making today. That is why we need to ensure that there is excellent advice. I see that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, is here, so I will not go into the detail of the Committee’s recommendations.

Matt Rodda: It is good to see you in your place, Ms Bardell. My hon. Friend is making an excellent point about the very real difficulties facing so many families. Does she agree that she is, in part, referring to the wider cost of living crisis and its worrying knock-on effects on many, many families? They feel forced to make these terrible decisions because they are struggling to get to the end of the week as a result of rising heating and fuel bills.

Emma Hardy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The message that we would like to get to those who are making savings is: “Do not do it by not contributing to a pension, because you will need that money in future.” That is why we need important, impartial advice.

I am not a pensions specialist. I am just somebody with a keen interest in the subject because I see what happens to too many people when they go into retirement without the pensions that they need, and I see what happens when people are given poor advice and are defrauded. People just do not understand. They choose

to take the lump sum today, not realising it pushes them into a higher tax bracket, and not realising the consequences for their future income. They just do not fully understand all the decisions. I truly believe that if we give people better advice, they will make decisions that mean we will, hopefully, have fewer people in poverty in future.

As I said, I was disappointed by what the FCA said in evidence to the Treasury Committee. We need the firm and clear message from the Government that they will get on with the trials. They should not spend any more time messing around with them. That is a priority; it would help get the situation moving more quickly.

Several hon. Members rose—

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): Order. I want wind-up speeches to start no later than 10.30 am. I will not impose a time limit, but I ask Members to be mindful of that. I call Gareth Davies.

10.9 am

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Bardell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) on securing this debate. I was not going to speak today, but felt compelled to do so because I was so impressed that there was yet another debate in this House on the pension fund industry. It is a fantastic thing. Since leaving the fund management industry in 2019 to start this new job, I have been struck by how infrequently we discuss pensions and savings, yet it is so important to all the things that we care about across the House.

We should not forget that Britain is a global leader in pension fund investing. We are one of the largest pension fund markets in the world, with £3 trillion under investment. Some £9.9 trillion is invested through the City of London and fund managers like my old shop. I can tell all Members present that the industry is full of some fantastic advisers and investors, and some of the brightest and best minds in the world.

However, we clearly have some issues that we need to tackle. My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley highlighted many of them—maybe too many for the Minister’s liking. In my region, the east midlands, 69% of people who are investing in a pension do not receive advice, so there is a problem. I want to talk for a couple of minutes on how we can tackle the root causes, because we do not have an adequate culture of savings in this country, and I believe that starts from the very beginning of people’s working lives. I will offer a few suggestions as to how the Minister could address the problem in future Bills.

First, let me say that the power of our pension market is astronomical, tackling the things that we all care about. Whether it is levelling up our communities in Leeds, Hull or Grantham, or building infrastructure, our pension funds have the power and capital to do it. If we want to tackle climate change, unlocking pension assets to invest in renewable energy is vital. We can also do more to help younger people get on the housing ladder. The New Zealand Government introduced KiwiSaver, which allows young people to dip into their pension pot to put down a deposit to buy a first home, and there is more that we can do to unlock pension assets and tackle the things that we all care about.

However, the reality is that 12 million people in this country are under-saving, putting at risk their safety and security in older age. What can we do about that? First, we need to get people saving at an earlier age. We can do that by building on the success of auto-enrolment, which has seen 10 million additional people saving into a pension fund. I do not think they are being tricked; I think it is raising awareness of the importance of saving. That has of course been a cross-party effort. Auto-enrolment was introduced under a Labour Government in 2008 and brought forward by the Liberal Democrat and Conservative coalition in 2012. It is an example of what we can do when we work together. Let us expand auto-enrolment to 18 to 22-year-olds and start them saving earlier. Of course, it is that age group of people who will benefit most from the compounding benefits of saving.

I am sympathetic to the Social Market Foundation report on this very subject of advice on the use of technology. We can use technology and encourage fintech entrepreneurs to develop technology to enable people to view their pension pots and investments a lot more clearly. We should get behind the efforts of the Minister and the Government to give a stronger nudge towards pension guidance, which will be much more important than Members have said in the debate so far.

I am struck by the number of job adverts in this country that do not mention pension contributions, even though they can contribute about a third of total take-home income. When a job advert goes out, often it states the salary but not the contribution to a pension, which is bonkers. If we could change that somehow, it would encourage people to be much more mindful of how the jobs they are taking can contribute to their retirement.

Finally, there are things that we can do to make pension saving much more practical in meeting young people's challenges. The No. 1 challenge for a lot of people in Grantham and Stamford, which I represent, is buying a house, and the Minister could look at that.

I applaud my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley for securing the debate, and I am grateful to the House for letting me speak.

10.14 am

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) on securing the debate and on his opening speech.

There was a serious flaw in implementing the pension freedoms. They were announced by George Osborne in his Budget speech in 2014 and implemented the following year. He said in his announcement that

"no one will have to buy an annuity. We are going to introduce a new guarantee, enforced by law, that everyone who retires on these defined contribution schemes will be offered free, impartial, face-to-face advice on how to get the most from the choices they will now have."—[*Official Report*, 19 March 2014; Vol. 577, c. 793.]

It was a very clear recognition of the risks involved in people having much more latitude over their pension savings—often the largest sum of money they will ever have access to—and that the Government needed to ensure that everyone had guidance to help them make sound decisions. However, that guarantee has never materialised, and the hon. Member for Amber Valley

was absolutely right to say that hundreds of thousands are accessing their pension pots without understanding what they are trying to do.

We do have the Pension Wise service, which is excellent. It is free and impartial, as George Osborne promised, and as the hon. Member for Amber Valley said, it gets very good ratings from those who use it—the problem is that very few people do. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) rightly said—I apologise to her for being absent for some of her speech—one of the reasons why Pension Wise is important is so that people can avoid being scammed. In June 2015, I received from the Treasury the answer to parliamentary written question 2227, which said that

"Pension Wise was launched to help people understand their options when taking advantage of the pension freedoms, including how to spot and avoid scams."

Over the past seven years, there has been a very big phenomenon of pension scams that it is in everybody's interest to prevent. So the default should be that people get a Pension Wise appointment.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Is the Chair of the Select Committee as concerned as I am that, despite Pension Wise being an excellent service, the number of Pension Wise appointments is actually falling? There is real concern here, which is why many of us want to see auto-appointments.

Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right.

The importance of guaranteeing guidance was stressed repeatedly, not just in George Osborne's announcement but by the Government in the couple of years afterwards. The Treasury's public financial guidance review, published for consultation in March 2016, said:

"Guidance is vital to ensure that individuals are fully aware of their options before they make a decision on what to do with their retirement savings".

The hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), who was then Economic Secretary, said in April 2016 that the Government were introducing

"a requirement that, in effect, ensures that consumers with a high-value annuity receive appropriate financial advice before making the decision to sell their annuity".—[*Official Report*, 19 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 876.]

In April 2018, her successor—the current Economic Secretary—the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), said that before proceeding with an access or transfer application,

"subject to any exceptions, schemes must ensure that individuals have either received Pension Wise guidance or have opted out."—[*Official Report*, 24 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 831.]

That commitment, which the Minister appeared to believe he was delivering four years ago, has never been delivered.

The Treasury has very good reason to be concerned that people should make sound decisions in this area, but so does the Minister's Department. Baroness Buscombe, when she was a Minister at the Department for Work and Pensions, said in May 2018 that

"We all want people to make more informed decisions and to make it the norm to use Pension Wise before accessing their pension."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 1 May 2018; Vol. 790, c. 1995.]

[*Stephen Timms*]

Let me quote back to the Minister what he said in a debate on the Pension Schemes Act 2021, that Pension Wise should become the norm. He has since distanced himself a bit from that view, but he did express it: on Third Reading, I said that I was sorry he had not followed Baroness Buscombe and expressed the view that Pension Wise should become the norm, and he intervened on me to correct me. He said:

“I do—I said so.”—[*Official Report*, 16 November 2020; Vol. 684, c. 136.]

I responded to his intervention by welcoming the apparently universal agreement that taking up Pension Wise guidance should be the norm. Everyone agreed, but in October 2020, the Department published the “Stronger Nudge to pensions guidance” statement of policy intent, which said that the new nudges that would be introduced would increase take-up from one in 33 to one in nine. The most recent figures quoted by the Social Market Foundation last week suggest that take-up now stands at about one in seven.

As the hon. Member for Amber Valley said, the expectations at the start were way higher than that. Michelle Cracknell, the then head of the Pensions Advisory Service, which was subsequently absorbed into the Money and Pensions Service, said in evidence in October 2014 that

“ambition is that the take-up rate will be very high, with over 75% of people taking the guidance”,

but that it might only be 25% to start with. In fact, it has never got anywhere near 25%, let alone 75%.

The Committee’s concern about Pension Wise take-up is long-standing and goes back well before I became Chair, to the period years ago when the hon. Member for Amber Valley was a member of the Committee. The Committee’s 2017 report stated:

“Free and impartial Pension Wise guidance, provided by telephone or face-to-face appointment, is greatly valued by those who use it. Take up, however, is not high enough.”

The report went on to point out that

“the existing Pension Wise promotion regime”

had

“proved insufficient.”

It is a very good service: nine out of 10 of those who use it report high or very high satisfaction—that is a pretty impressive—but it is hidden away from most people. The default ought to be that people get an appointment. That is why the Committee has recommended at least trialling automatic Pension Wise appointments.

Sir Hector Sants, the chair of the Money and Pensions Service, told the Committee in March that 72% of people change their mind about what they will do with their pensions savings as a result of talking to Pension Wise. As he pointed out,

“that tells you that the vast majority of people, left to their own devices, will probably make a poor decision.”

As far as I can see, the Government’s current policy will leave the great majority of savers in exactly that position.

We need to do more. Government and regulators need to end their indifference on this. We need at least a trial of auto-enrolment into a service that enables better outcomes from pensions savings. There will no doubt be

difficulties, but let us at least try it out. The Money and Pensions Service has told the Committee that it would be very happy to support a trial.

The Committee recommended that

“the Government sets a goal for the Money and Pensions Service for the combined use of Pension Wise and paid-for advice when accessing pension pots for the first time”

of

“at least 60 per cent”.

The Minister suggested in his intervention that he thinks use might not be far from that level at the moment, so let us use that as a clear goal. The Committee also recommended

“that automatic Pension Wise appointments are trialled.”

We suggested

“two trials: one with an appointment when a person accesses their pension for the first time and another at the age of 50, before they can access their pension savings.”

I commend those proposals and recommendations to the Minister.

10.22 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I start by wishing you a return to full health and strength, Ms Bardell, so that you are able to play football again? At the moment, it is quite unlikely that you are able to. It is nice to see you here.

It is a pleasure to hear the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), who I thank for securing the debate. It is no secret that I am totally sold on the pensions issue. I know its importance, and I have expressed that in previous debates. As a teenager, I was encouraged by my mother—you never say no to your mum—to take out a pension at a very early age. Obviously, over the years, we have taken out a few others as well. There is no doubt in my mind that, in these uncertain times, it is more important than ever that people ensure not only that they have a pension, but that they have the one that works for them.

I am pleased to see the Minister in his place. I know that, like me, he is sold on this issue. We can see from his earlier response that he is energetic and keen to respond to hon. Members’ questions.

I did a quick round robin in my office among the six staff I employ. Of the six, only two actively check their pensions—one personally and one with her financial adviser. I thought having a financial adviser was quite impressive. Some staff are obviously very aware of the future. The other four members of staff, ranging in age between 20s and 40s, have no knowledge of what to do with their pensions. I think that is query. They have a pension—that is good news—but they have no idea what it really means. That is the question and that is the thrust of this debate.

Without a UK-wide perception of the importance of pensions, we may be in trouble. People must be aware that it is not enough to know that they have a pension; they should be aware of what it is and actively try to understand what it will do for their future.

I received a detailed briefing from Just Group, which highlighted that, as noted by the Financial Inclusion Commission in January 2021,

“pensions have largely been absent from the financial inclusion debate—even though they are a major factor in ensuring people are financially and socially included in retirement.”

The concepts, terms and associated risks are unfamiliar to most, which creates risks for savers when research shows that the complexity of related decisions is high and the familiarity with the products, options and processes is so low.

Guy Opperman: I am trying to make it a tradition to always intervene on the hon. Gentleman in any debate. I feel that Parliament is better when he intervenes, so I have decided that I will always try to intervene on him. The hon. Gentleman raised the point that pensions are not part of the financial inclusion debate—I look forward to appearing in front of the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) tomorrow, sort of. [*Laughter.*] The serious point is that the financial inclusion forum, which was set up after the Financial Guidance and Claims Act 2018 was brought in, specifically has Ministers from the Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions working together. While it is not the main event—I totally accept that—there is no doubt that a real effort has been made. I would urge those who doubt my comments to look at the specifics of the reports of that financial inclusion forum.

Jim Shannon: I never doubt the Minister's commitment to do what he says; I am sold on it already.

The Government created Pension Wise in 2015 as a free, impartial guidance service for people to use before accessing defined contribution pensions under the pension freedoms policy. There has been a lot of change in policy direction. The service was intended to enable informed decision making and has received consistently excellent feedback. User evaluations found that 94% of Pension Wise appointment customers were either very or fairly satisfied—at 77% and 18% respectively—with 97% saying they had already recommended or would recommend the service to others. That is good news for Pension Wise, but it also leaves people more informed and better equipped to avoid pension scams than non-users.

However, Pension Wise usage remains low and has actually fallen over the last three years. I do not think that we can ignore that. FCA data shows that the number of DC pension pots accessed after Pension Wise was used fell from 94,744 in 2018-19 to 94,274 in 2019-20, and down to 81,805 in 2020-21—a 14% reduction. We cannot ignore those facts. Perhaps the Minister will tell us how we can energise that again. Similarly, the number of pensions accessed via a regulated financial adviser fell by 4% in that period. That is important because Pension Wise provides an opportunity for savers who do not access financial advice to at least understand their options and speak with a professional who can impart key, relevant information, answer their questions and correct misunderstandings. However, the FCA data confirmed that hundreds of thousands of savers are accessing their pension benefits each year without first using Pension Wise, even though appointments are available for free. We must reach that mindset and change that.

There is clearly a massive breakdown in communication with our working people regarding pensions and the fact that they should have an active role in that respect. There is a fear concealed behind the attitude of my younger staff, which we should perhaps look at, that they “don't do finance”—those are their words. When I asked whether they had ever topped up their pension with additional money in their account, they looked at

me blankly and asked, “What does that mean?” We must get the message across, beginning in schools and throughout working life, that pensions are not something to be scared of.

Ms Bardell, you have been kind with your time, as have other hon. Members, so I will conclude with this point. A pension is a part of life, in preparation for the hopefully happy days of retirement—hopefully people will all see that. However, what will add to that happiness is a working pension that can provide when we cannot and do not work. We all have a part to play in that. I look to the Minister, as I always do—I know that he understands where I and others are coming from—to outline how we can get the engagement that is apparently, for some, missing.

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): Before I call on the Front Benchers, I will just say that I expect there to be at least a few minutes left at the end for the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) to wind up.

10.29 am

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Bardell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) on bringing this debate forward. I know that he has followed this issue for some time, always with diligence and concern for the outcomes experienced by pension savers. I also thought that he spoke very well in the recent social security benefits up-rating debate.

The hon. Member set out clearly how complex pensions can be and the need, therefore, for people to access impartial advice to get the best outcome from the pensions that they have worked hard to save for over their lives. His final point was that if we do not run a trial of auto-appointments, people will continue to make the wrong decisions and be at risk of being scammed, and there will still be no evidence of the value of auto-appointments.

We also heard good contributions from the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), from the Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), and from the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies)—and no debate would be complete without the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle and the right hon. Member for East Ham both spoke about the risk of people getting scammed, and we need to remember that. What could be more heart-breaking than working hard all your life, looking forward to a comfortable retirement, and then being scammed out of your lifetime savings? It is awful.

Another thing I would like to draw the Minister's attention to that needs to be addressed is that there are people who give the wrong advice or scam people, and then set themselves up as a claims management company to advocate for the people who just lost their money. That needs to end. The Government must put regulations in place to stop these people reinventing themselves as claims management companies.

A constituent of mine who is a financial adviser highlighted that her fees as a regulated financial adviser are going through the roof, so people are accessing unregulated advisers who do not pay those fees and can undercut the people providing real advice. That is another subject the Government need to address.

Chris Stephens: The Select Committee, of which I am a member, has heard evidence from the Association of British Insurers, the Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association, the Financial Inclusion Commission and Age UK, which all say that there should be an evaluation trial of auto-appointments as a means of increasing take-up of pension guidance. They are correct, are they not?

Alan Brown: My hon. Friend is right; I was going to come on to that. When the industry and all those bodies are saying that there should be a trial of auto-appointments, it is not controversial, and is something the Government should embrace. It was a Conservative Government that set up the Pension Wise advice system as a complementary service to the pension freedoms legislation, so it surely makes sense that the Government want to ensure that as many people as possible access impartial advice.

According to the Association of British Insurers, over £42 billion has been flexibly withdrawn since 2015, but just 14% of defined-contribution pension pots are accessed after the use of Pension Wise. We are talking about potentially billions of pounds being accessed with a high risk of it not being utilised properly for maximum gain. As the hon. Member for Amber Valley pointed out, people might make decisions that suddenly mean they are in higher tax bracket for the first time in their lives. Simple advice would remedy that.

Realistically, those figures should make the Minister sit up right away and pledge to take action. As others have highlighted, Financial Conduct Authority data confirms that the use of guidance and advice has actually decreased in recent years. Again, that should be an urgent call to action for the Government.

In March 2020, the chairman of the Money and Pensions Service, Sir Hector Sants, told the Work and Pensions Committee:

“A significant number of the people who contact Pension Wise will come away saying that, after having spoken to our guidance service, they have concluded that they should do something different from what they had in mind in the first place... There is a figure that suggests that 72% of people are saying they have changed their mind about what they will do as a result of talking to our guidance service. In a way, that is a simple statistic that tells you that the vast majority of people, left to their own devices, will probably make a poor decision.”

Again, £42 billion has been accessed since 2015, but 72% of the small number of people who received advice ended up making different decisions following receipt and consideration of that advice. The level of cash that is being accessed, with poor decisions possibly made on the back of that, is frightening—and, of course, some people are being scammed altogether.

The chairman of the Financial Conduct Authority, Charles Randell, made the following observation when asked about the adequacy of regulatory policy when he gave oral evidence to the Treasury Committee in November 2020:

“This issue about people making poor choices when exercising the freedoms and responsibilities that have been put on them in the last 10 years, through a variety of changes in Government policy, is probably the one that I worry about most of all.”

Does the Minister not share these concerns? I am concerned that he does not. I welcome the fact that the right hon. Member for East Ham highlighted comments

that the Minister has made previously that he does not seem to be holding true to. Is the Minister blind to these concerns that everybody in the industry is raising?

The other crucial aspect in all this is that, for those who have used Pension Wise, it has been deemed a success. When the Government have a success story that they can relay, why are they not trying to build on it and enhance it? The 2019-20 Pension Wise user evaluation found that 94% of appointment users were very or fairly satisfied with their overall experience of Pension Wise; 88% of appointment users said that Pension Wise helped to improve their understanding of pension options; and 70% of Pension Wise users correctly answered eight true or false statements relating to their pension options, compared with 43% of non-users. That last statistic is proof of the additional knowledge gained by accessing impartial advice.

In contrast to the evidence gathered since 2015, the Government's approach to non-advised savers seems to inhabit a space somewhere between “fingers crossed it'll be okay” and “if savers stuff it up, that's their own fault”. Again, that brings me back to what the hon. Member for Amber Valley outlined about the known risk that affects savers; he put it well.

Currently, 19 million people are at various stages of their defined-contribution pension journey. Their retirement outcomes depend, first, on the generosity of their employer's pension offer and, secondly and critically, on the decisions they make at the accumulation and decumulation stages. If a saver has contributed to pensions for over 40 years, surely it is right that the system does all it can to ensure that they take as little time as 40 minutes for a guidance appointment.

The Minister's response to this issue of low take-up of guidance and advice has not been to address it directly but instead to point to the “stronger nudge”, as he did earlier, or to other pet projects such as mid-life MOTs and pension dashboards. They are measures that I support, but they are not available in the here and now, whereas Pension Wise is. As for the stronger nudge, the FCA and his own Department admit that, on the basis of trials to date, it is unlikely to have a dramatic effect on guidance take-up. Indeed, the trials suggested that there would be an increase of only 8% in the take-up of advice, so that clearly is not the solution.

Once again, I ask the Minister and the Government to commit to a trial of auto-appointments. Two trials could be considered: one with an appointment when a person accesses their pension for the first time, and another—this idea came from the Select Committee—with an appointment at the age of 50, before someone can access their pension savings, which is the kind of mid-life MOT that the Minister supports. Piloting an auto-appointment system for the Pension Wise service is a clear recommendation of the Work and Pensions Committee, and the Association of British Insurers supports it too.

The Committee also recommended that the UK Government should set a goal of at least 60% of people using Pension Wise, the Government guidance service from MaPS, or receiving paid-for advice when they access their pension pots for the first time. Meeting such a target would see billions of pounds being accessed in a way that minimises the risk of poor decision making by people who are not used to assessing such sums of money.

Will the Minister confirm, once and for all, that he supports a trial of auto-appointments, as recommended by the Select Committee and the industry? It is a no-risk option for the Government to implement. Will he confirm the timescale for such a trial? If not, will he say why he is ignoring the advice and why he is willing to allow people unwittingly to continue making bad decisions with their pension pots? If they are accessing that money and using it for the best means possible, it should be able to support not just them but the wider economy better.

10.39 am

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Bardell. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) for what I thought was a very thoughtful and knowledgeable speech, which has left us all with a great deal of food for thought.

I also thank the Chair of the Select Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), and Members across the House, in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens). In addition, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies)—I beg his pardon—spoke with great knowledge of the sector; I appreciate his detailed explanation.

I do not want to completely rehash or repeat points that have been made by colleagues, but I want to focus the Minister and ask him for a response on one or two very important things. First, however, we should acknowledge, seven years on from their introduction, that while increased pension freedoms have brought greater flexibility, they have also resulted in a potentially greater degree of risk. Although advice services such as Pension Wise have played an important role in making advice more available, the service's own figures show that just 14% of savers are accessing that advice. That really is not good enough.

Clearly, most people will make a decision about their pension—a decision of this scale—only once in their lives, so it is staggering that only 14% of people are receiving appropriate advice from Pension Wise. Imagine if only 14% of people were seeking advice for any other major financial decision—obviously, alarm bells would be ringing in Ministers' offices and across the relevant sector. We have to reflect on that, so I hope that the Minister will try to address some of the thoughtful and well-made points raised by the hon. Member for Amber Valley and others.

I also want to draw the Minister's attention to the fact that the same points have been raised by a number of other voices outside of the House today, so I hope he will go into this issue in some detail. I hope, in particular, that he will address the point made by the hon. Member for Amber Valley that many of the people who are not seeking advice have smaller pension pots and possibly less financial experience, and may need a greater degree of support, while those seeking advice appear to have larger pension pots and, arguably, may have a bit more financial experience. That seems to be the wrong way around.

I hope that Government policy can focus on that and, in particular, that they will look at some of the behavioural points—the nudges—and ways that they may legitimately

assist people in this important matter. The Chair of the Select Committee also raised some interesting and thoughtful points on the issue of the potential trial service. I hope the Minister will comment on those.

I appreciate that time is limited, so I want to draw the Minister's attention to another key area; I hope he will update the House on what the Government intend to do on this matter. The flip side of the lack of advice is the very sad and quite worrying growth in the number of scams; it is interesting that the two things have happened at the same time. While organisations such as Age UK have produced guidance to support those who may be vulnerable, it is really the role of Government to do much more on this important issue. Again, as with the issue of the lack of advice, the question of scams has been highlighted by the official Opposition, the Work and Pensions Committee, former Ministers and other respected figures such as Martin Lewis.

The pensions industry estimates that more than 40,000 people may have been cheated out of £10 billion-worth of pensions savings since freedoms were introduced in 2015. Action Fraud has reported that pension scams are becoming one of the UK's most common types of fraud. These scams are often harder to spot than expected, even for those with good IT or tech skills. Research by Citizens Advice showed that one in eight people who said they were confident with technology found it difficult to spot a scam. However, it is possible to take action against that sort of fraud; as the Minister knows well from his involvement in the passage of the Pension Schemes Act 2021, the Government have taken action on telephone fraud, which is a related type of scam.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. If someone is approached by a person with a scheme to improve their pension that looks too good, it probably is too good. Be careful—if someone promises you the world, the stars and the moon, there is something wrong.

Matt Rodda: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point; we do need to apply common sense to these very important matters. As I was saying, the Pension Schemes Act made it illegal to cold call and offer advice, in an attempt to reduce the number of telephone scams. Obviously, there are other forms of scams.

Emma Hardy: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I think everyone would accept that the sophistication of the fraudsters is developing day by day, and that both legislation, and police and the Government action, is playing catch up—as it always will. Therefore, there is an urgency to deal with this; while the Government might have dealt with the telephone matter, scams are now more likely to be online or via other avenues. We need to make this a priority.

Matt Rodda: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that, sadly, technology and the ability of fraudsters is racing ahead. We need to take far more urgent action to tackle these awful problems. In fact, she has anticipated my next point; I hope that the Minister will clarify the Government's position on this. I understand that he may be interested in the possibility of this action being included in the Online Safety Bill, and I ask him to update us on the discussions he has had with his colleagues. That Bill offers all sorts of possibilities to tackle these

[*Matt Rodda*]

dreadful frauds. I hope that the Government will take determined action to tackle those problems, given that they have legislation that could address them in an appropriate and timely manner.

I will briefly mention some concerns about the roll-out of the dashboard and one or two other tools. Like Members across the House, I welcome the Government's approach in attempting to devise the dashboard, and I recognise the need for greater information, but I understand from speaking to the industry that there are a series of technical problems. We should not let those delay the process too much. I ask the Government to take on board the industry's views on that, and to be careful to ensure, as it is rolled out, that the dashboard is robust. I see that the Minister is nodding; I am sure that he will want to elaborate on that. It is important not only to achieve the dashboard, but to make sure that it is a high-quality product that offers the hoped-for level of reassurance and advice.

It is fair to say that the Government are taking rather small steps in the right direction, but they need to do so much more on the issue of advice. I hope that the Minister will elaborate on those points and reassure us that he is addressing this issue with the level of energy that is needed.

10.47 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): First and foremost, we all wish you well, Ms Bardell. We gather you were doing your best Franz Klammer impersonation down the slopes; I am certain that you will be back on the football field before too long. You are also the third Chair that we have enjoyed in barely a one-and-a-quarter-hour debate.

Today is an odd day, as we have all struggled through the pension-related tube strikes. We have dealt with many known unknowns, both in life and in the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills). In broad terms, I was in glorious agreement with him. The wonderful thing about pensions debates in this House is that effectively we are all singing from the same hymn sheet, and trying to get the same outcomes. However, there might be differences in how we reach those outcomes and, in the nine minutes that I have, I will try and address the 35 to 40 points that have been put to me that require urgent answers.

I will defer some of the questions asked by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) because, to my great delight—I was told only last week—I am going to the Treasury Committee tomorrow specifically to answer on financial inclusion. That issue was also raised by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle raised a couple of points that I want to refer to briefly. She described the number of pension pots as four to five; we will probably have 10 to 11. It is a much bigger problem, but we are on it with two particular interventions. In the short term there is the pension tracing service, which I strongly urge all colleagues to recommend to their constituents, because they can be tracked down on the present basis. However, it is relatively basic and clunky; the dashboard is clearly a much better thing.

I will address a specific point about the dashboard at the outset. Many parts of my portfolio and job involve herculean heavy lifting—as the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), who has done my job previously, knows. The dashboard involves the most herculean heavy lifting of them all, taking 40,000 pensions schemes, getting all the data together, making them all talk to one another, incorporating the state pension and doing so in a data-friendly safe way.

I want to put on record my support for Chris Curry and the team. I have to say that I am not aware of such criticisms from businesses. That relates to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley: data is everything here. It really is. The pension schemes have to improve their data, and once they do, a whole host of positive actions can flow. The dashboard is clearly one of them. It will allow an individual to see what they have, in the comfort of their own home or with an independent financial adviser, and do all of the things that we want them to do. The data flows from the dashboard decisions. The industry is concerned that I am pressing them to get its data together in a robust way; I do not shy away from that. Some people want me to go faster than I am. I would like to think that we are actually going quite fast to get the dashboard up and running. It will be live, in some shape or form, very soon.

That brings me to the specific points made in the debate; I obviously look forward to being grilled on all matters of financial inclusion tomorrow. In my experience, automatic enrolment opt-outs are not actually as bad as the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle described, but I will take her point away and have a look at it. Obviously, they are a relevant factor.

I want briefly to deal with the point about the FCA. Clearly, my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley chose to have the Pensions Minister answer today's debate rather than the Treasury Minister who deals with all matters of advice and the FCA. That makes my life a little difficult, but we are one Government, so I answer for everything, whatever the situation. The 2020 evaluation of the "Financial Advice Market Review" found that the financial advice market was going in the right direction, with more people accessing advice, but also recognised that some remaining challenges in the market needed further work. The Treasury is working with the FCA on the next steps. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle raised the FCA's stronger nudge approach. I believe that the Department for Work and Pensions is actually going way faster. In 93 days, by my count—on 1 June—the stronger nudge policy will come into law. Although I obviously revere and adore the FCA and Treasury, and everything that they do, the DWP is at the front of that particular queue and is driving that policy forward.

Let me try to address the point about the signposting of Pension Wise by pension schemes. Wake-up packs are provided on an ongoing basis, but we also believe very strongly that impartial guidance from the Money and Pensions Service is a very good thing. MAPS is a very young institution. Parliament decided, following Select Committee reports, to legislate to create it and it melded all the previous operations together. It is a young institution—not even four years old. We are gently trying to nudge it into a greater take-up of all of its services, and it is part of the dashboard delivery

service, for example. Although Pension Wise provides guidance about the options for accessing defined-contribution savings, it is primarily designed for those aged 50 and above who are making decisions about how to access such savings.

However, we are ignoring the MoneyHelper pensions service, formerly the Pensions Advisory Service. No one has mentioned it in any way whatsoever. The stats show that there were 113,000 Pension Wise appointments in 2020-21, and that MoneyHelper supported 220,000 people during that time. We are very focused. I understand why, in discussing Pension Wise, we have not discussed in any way all of the great work that the Money and Pensions Service is doing with MoneyHelper on pensions. The number of people using the service went up by 8% in 2019-20.

Separately, a report by the Social Market Foundation, which is a lovely organisation—I revere the fact that any think-tank is doing any work on pensions, and I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies) that the more we talk about them, the better—made the point that we need a greater online service. The number of people using MoneyHelper’s digital pension tools has grown by 47%, from 170,000 users in the first quarter of 2020-21 compared with Q1 of the following year. There is much greater usage of MoneyHelper and other online services.

The statistics on MoneyHelper show how much the service helps, but I want to address the stronger nudge. It comes into force on 1 June, which, off the top of my head, is in 93 days. It requires schemes to go beyond signposting to guidance, as they currently do. They will be required to take an active role by offering to book a Pension Wise appointment on behalf of the member when they seek to access their defined contribution savings. That will be presented as a normal part of the process for accessing a pension.

Schemes will also be unable to proceed with any application to access savings until members have either received or explicitly and clearly opted out of guidance. For occupational schemes, the opt-out must be given in a separate communication from the member. We believe that that will ensure that all members are required to make an active, informed choice on guidance before they are able to access their savings. I believe that that strikes the right balance and is the right way forward. Although we all want to do more, Parliament has decided and has legislated for the Money and Pensions Service, Pension Wise and the Department for Work and Pensions to drive forward the stronger nudge as the way forward. I urge colleagues to get behind that in the short term.

In the short time I have left, I want to address fraud. Obviously, we believe that the stronger nudge will help. The Pension Schemes Act 2021 sets out four red flags to address those specific problems, and I pay tribute to the Pension Scams Industry Group and the other organisations

with which I have worked. I hope that the draft Online Safety Bill will continue the good work that pre-legislative scrutiny has shown we are doing on pensions and investment scams. I have personally raised that with Google, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. All those companies, particularly Google, need to be acutely aware that it is utterly unacceptable that there are 47 fake versions of Aviva at the top of the online search list, and that that needs to stop. To be fair, those companies can do that themselves without Government action.

Alan Brown: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I do not have time, as I have only 30 seconds left. Those companies do not need Government action. They can stop all of that by simply vetting their advertisers. It is long overdue that Google and others took such action. I sincerely hope that they do so on an ongoing basis, rather than our having to force them to do so at the threat of penalties.

I have totally run out of time, but I thank all colleagues. I genuinely believe we are all on the same pathway and journey, but just nudging each other in slightly different ways.

10.58 am

Nigel Mills: I am grateful to the Minister and to all colleagues who have taken part in the debate. It is regrettable that we did not quite give the Minister a strong enough nudge to convince him to make a change to the Government’s position at this stage. We will keep a watching eye on that and come back to it, because even with the stronger nudge starting in 93 days, as the Minister said, we know that will not get us to where we want to be.

Hundreds of thousands of people will still make this life-changing decision without the information they need, and without even knowing that they do not have the information that they need. That is not a situation that we want to see and it will inevitably lead to some people suffering detriment that they could dodge with the free, relatively quick and completely painless high-quality guidance service that is out there—a system that we put in place and wanted to become the norm. We wanted high take-up and we have not got there yet.

I recognise that there has been progress and I am sure we will see some progress as the new rules come in from 1 June. I hope that they solve the problem and that it goes away, but I fear it will not and I look forward to the next time we are here debating the issue. Hopefully, we can then make some further progress that we did not quite get to today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered take-up of pensions guidance and advice.

Planning Permission and Housing Need: Wealden

11 am

Hannah Bardell (in the Chair): I will call Nusrat Ghani to move the motion, and 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.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered planning permission and calculation of housing need numbers for Wealden.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Bardell. I welcome the Minister to his new role, and I look forward to working with him intimately in helping Wealden put together its housing plan.

It is a huge honour to represent Wealden in Parliament. It is a joy to live in one of the most beautiful parts of our country, and our communities are excellent. During covid, I established the Wealden Heroes Award, which the Minister may want to reflect on. It showed the fantastic work that so many of our residents did for each other in the communities we wish to serve.

Before there is any confusion, let me point out that Wealden District Council covers more than my constituency, even though we share the same name. To continue the confusion—mostly to confuse the Minister—my married name is also Wheeldon, but I go by Ghani in this place. Many assumptions are made, but my constituency covers Forest Row, Wadhurst, Crowborough, the glorious Ashdown Forest, Mayfield, Uckfield, Fletching, Horeham, Hailsham and all the villages in between. They are watching, Minister, so I had to point out all of them.

When and where new homes are built is always controversial, but I fully recognise that our country and county need more homes and that a level of development is inevitable. My case work reflects that. I work with businesses that want homes for their workers, and with domestic violence victims who need social housing. I work with older residents who want to downsize, and with younger families who want to stop renting and buy their first home. I will never forget that, a few years ago, the fantastic Fletching Primary School was struggling because of the lack of kids coming in. We also did not have many young people in the area. When I speak to health practitioners serving Wealden, especially nurses, one of the big issues is that they just cannot afford to move in.

In Wealden, we are realists; we are not nimbys. Wealden District Council is already going above and beyond in order to accommodate the requirement set by the Government. However, the numbers are just too high. They ignore our environmental constraints and expect Wealden District Council to pick up the slack for failing neighbouring councils, which I will expand on as I go on. Wealden is presently working with the Department to put together its housing plan, and the Minister will know that I have been working with the Department since 2015—seven long years to try to resolve Wealden's housing plan. I hope that today's debate will help Wealden and the Minister to put that in place.

One of the big points that I need the Minister to respond to is about the population growth calculation. I am deeply concerned about how the statistics are used

by the Department. Based on the Department's standard method, Wealden's share is 1,221 new houses each year. However, the standard method uses Office for National Statistics population projection data from 2014 that show that between 2021 and 2031, a total of 212,739 new houses are needed each year for the whole of England. However, the corresponding figure in the latest data, which are for 2018, shows a reduction of 161,048 houses per annum—a reduction of 24%. According to the 2014 ONS projections, Wealden's share was 872 houses per year, whereas the 2018 projection is for 598 houses per year, an even larger reduction of 31%. Ignoring the reduction just does not make sense, and I hope the Minister can confirm what data the Department is using. If there is not the population need for the homes, what is the justification for the Department's data and the pressure on Wealden District Council?

According to current targets, 24,500 houses are scheduled across Wealden District Council between 2018 and 2038. To put that into context, 24,500 homes is equivalent to approximately one home for every 2.8 already in the district. Let us just think about how that would ever make sense, because I do not know how such numbers are meant to stack up. From 2017-18 to 2019-20, the requirement for new houses for Wealden went up from 499 to 1,236—an increase of 226%. Those targets are incredibly high and one could even say slightly absurd considering the jump. I hope the Minister will explain to us how the targets are set.

Notwithstanding the large increase in deliveries of new houses, Wealden Council was unable to deliver the quota demanded by the Department, as it achieved 83% for the housing delivery test. Wealden was therefore penalised with an increase to its five-year land supply by a buffer of 20%, resulting in a five-year land supply figure of 7,440. Moreover, planning applications are often granted but not built out for a number of years. Although Wealden did achieve 83%, it has approved many more houses than that, and it is essential that those approvals are also included in the overall numbers.

At Wealden District Council, more than 7,600 permissions have been given for new homes, but not all of them are being built right now. During the past two years especially we have seen understandable delays in construction due to the disruptions of covid and supply chain issues. The projected completions within five years currently amount to 3.6 years' supply. We need to ensure that all homes that have been granted consent will count towards the forward targets and the five-year land supply as well. Over the last seven years, along with the council, I have repeatedly asked the Department to respond to this point, which will help Wealden council put together a more realistic housing plan, where the numbers will not be bounced around, which would stress constituents out even more. I hope the Minister will respond to that as well.

We talked about Wealden achieving just 83% of the housing delivery test, but only one authority in East Sussex has avoided continued Government sanctions for failing to meet the housing targets. Four out of the five local planning authorities in East Sussex have failed to deliver the housing requirement in the years up to March 2021. Hastings Borough Council and Rother District Council fell below 75% of their target, building an average of less than 200 dwellings a year, which compares to the 800 that Wealden is doing at the same time, yet those areas receive additional Government

support for infrastructure, whereas Wealden does not, because they traditionally fall into the metrics of deprivation. I hope the Minister can explain why, when a council achieves 83% compared with 75% in neighbouring authorities, it is further penalised and does not secure infrastructure funding. We need to have the right incentives in place for good councils.

We are incredibly excited about the levelling-up fund and all the funding that will come to our county. We have projects—I can see my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) is here—and funding for Hastings, Newhaven, Seaford and across the Lewes constituency. That is great for the county, but we want to see further investment in our roads. The levelling-up White Paper highlights planned investment for the A27 at Lewes, improvements to the Brighton mainline and a new hospital for Eastbourne.

As East Sussex MPs, we meet up every Tuesday afternoon under the auspices of my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) to make sure that we co-ordinate our funding. Although we appreciate the funding for the county, as I pointed out, Wealden builds above and beyond all of its neighbouring local authorities but tends to receive the least funding, and that has to be re-evaluated. A local authority that builds more homes than its neighbouring local authorities should be prioritised for funding, not penalised because it does not meet the traditional metrics of deprivation. Wealden should be rewarded for the homes that it is building.

I hope my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne will forgive me as I make my next point. Eastbourne also has an increasing population, and it tends to build higher-storey homes, but it constantly argues or complains that it does not have the space to build outwards, so the pressure falls on Wealden.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend and very dear parliamentary neighbour for giving way. I commend her on her tireless campaigning for Wealden to ensure there is sustainable and appropriate development. I know the pressure that Wealden is under, and part of that is because of Eastbourne, where we are constrained by the sea and downland, so it is challenging to deliver on the numbers. I rise in the name of that small part of my constituency that sits within Wealden District Council. Because of the beauty of the constituency, which my hon. Friend has described—much of it areas of outstanding natural beauty—Willingdon, Jevington and Wannock are often subject to planning applications—disproportionately so—and recently a very unpopular Mornings Mill application was kicked out. Does my hon. Friend agree that for development on that scale, without the infrastructure coming down the line, such as the road development she has mentioned but also, notably, GP practices, we simply cannot deliver on those numbers?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend and neighbour makes a very valid point. I am going to ask the Minister to consider putting in forward infrastructure funding before developments are fully developed, to ensure that our communities benefit from the new homes that are coming. Of course, Eastbourne has the sea, but it could also—I urge my lovely neighbour to consider this—build up so that we do not have to build out into the area of outstanding natural beauty in Wealden.

Moving across the county, we have the Pevensey levels and the South Downs in the south of Wealden, which cannot be developed, and then we have areas of outstanding natural beauty in the north of the district, including Ashdown forest—the home of Winnie the Pooh—which restricts growth. We therefore have a lot of pressure on areas such as Horam and Hailsham in the Low Weald, which tend to bear the brunt of housing applications. I hope my colleague and neighbour, the hon. Member for Eastbourne, will agree that it is unfair that Wealden has to shoulder local needs elsewhere in East Sussex and absorb the numbers we need for Eastbourne, Hastings and Lewes because those towns are unable to deliver their fair share. I hope the Minister can recognise the pressure that Wealden District Council is under and can try to not only deliver greater funding but support its need to push back unnecessary development proposals.

Caroline Ansell: My hon. Friend's point is well made, but does she agree that the dynamic she described around population growth applies equally to Eastbourne, where we need to see a significant fall in the numbers we are expected to build? There will then be every expectation that we can meet our own need and do not need to look to neighbours to bring forward these homes. The population forecasts that apply to my hon. Friend's constituency have equally cast far greater numbers in my patch.

Ms Ghani: The ONS data is the crux of the problem that we need to resolve. If the population growth is not as it has been tracked, then we need to re-evaluate the numbers that local authorities have to set their targets to, so I agree with my colleague. Hopefully, we will continue to meet every Tuesday to hash out planning for the foreseeable seven years as well.

I will now turn to infrastructure, which does not neatly sit within the Minister's Department, but I wish him to understand the pressure that the district is under. The scale of growth that the Government are asking for has to be accompanied by meaningful infrastructure funding, which also helps alleviate the pressure from new homes arriving in any area. We have major road arteries such as the A22, A26 and A27 connecting Wealden to the rest of the south-east, and they are in dire need of upgrades.

Our rail network is similar: I look forward to the Minister visiting Wealden, when he may have the joy of travelling on the Uckfield line—if he googles it, he can just google the “misery line”. Let me explain why: it is unreliable, and it is a real dinosaur. It operates one of the country's last diesel trains on a single track. It is completely unfit for this day and age, and it is already under pressure before the new homes have arrived. I am told that it is the most polluting line in the country; I have yet to check that figure, but we desperately need it to be electrified, and I will continue to campaign for that.

As my neighbour the hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne has mentioned, there are concerns about healthcare and dental care provision. We have a particular aging population, and because of the area we are in, we also have pressure on sewerage and water. We need greater broadband and of course we always need greater transport investment as well.

As I have mentioned to the Minister, after seven long years of meetings, it would be good to try to get to a point where everybody is comfortable. We were really

[Ms Ghani]

pleased that we were able to host a meeting with the Secretary of State last year to make sure that Wealden District Council was given the support it needed in putting together its plan. We want its plan to pass and to be successful. I would not be able to represent Wealden today without the support I receive from the district council leader, Bob Standley; the deputy leader for planning, Ann Newton; the chief executive officer of Wealden District Council, Trevor Scott; and all the fantastic councillors.

It is not just Wealden or our county: a lot of councillors are under huge pressure to deliver to meet the housing need, given the stress that it creates in local communities. Ann Newton in particular has received a lot of unnecessary abuse for just being the public servant trying to deliver for East Sussex.

These are my asks of the Minister: first, let us make housing targets advisory, not mandatory. Let us link Government funding, whether the towns fund, school funding, infrastructure, jobs and healthcare, to councils that build homes. Let us incentivise them; let us adapt the proposed infrastructure levy to ensure that infrastructure is provided before homes are built—the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne.

Let us help last-time buyers, as well as first-time buyers, by examining measures to encourage elderly homeowners to downsize by providing a stamp duty exemption or reduction. Let us reduce rates on the top end of stamp duty. People cannot afford to move when their circumstances change, because they simply cannot afford the stamp duty. Let us outlaw gazumping. Let us improve schemes to help housing associations, and Wealden Council, which has its own housing company, to develop and build bungalows. Let us have “use it or lose it” planning permissions. Let us prioritise low-carbon house building.

Lastly, and mostly importantly for Wealden, let us adapt current rules to fix situations where a council has given planning permission for sites that are not developed, but the council then faces Government censure when developers are at fault for refusing to build out those permissions. Let us include permissions granted for new homes in the housing number allocations. As mentioned, Wealden District Council has given 7,600 permissions for new homes; they have not all been built yet, but they are on their way. Will the Minister ensure that those are not only allocated within overall targets but go towards the overall five-year land supply, as well?

Those are a lot of asks for the Minister, but it is incredibly important for Wealden to get this right. It is the last Conservative council in the county and we are keen to build—properly and in an environmentally friendly way—homes that people want to move into. We can do that only with the support of the Minister, and I look forward to welcoming him to my constituency.

11.17 am

The Minister for Housing (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve, for my first time in this role, under your chairmanship, Ms Bardell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) for securing this important debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) for her interventions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wealden described her constituency as a beautiful area and listed the many communities that make it a unique place to live. I was particularly interested to hear about the Wealden heroes, and I think we all want to say thank you to our constituents, up and down the country, who have done so much during the pandemic to help those who needed support.

My hon. Friend is an assiduous Member on this important issue of building the houses we need in a way that gets the community behind it. I was interested in the debate between my two hon. Friends, which demonstrated clearly and visually the difficulties I will face in my role, with contrasting viewpoints about how to deliver these houses.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wealden will know that, due to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State’s quasi-judicial role in the planning system, I am unable to comment on the merits of a specific plan, but I can provide some general comments. Having an effective, up-to-date plan in place is essential to planning for and meeting housing requirements. Each plan is subject to a public examination in front of an independent inspector who examines plans impartially to ensure that they are legally compliant and sound.

Getting an up-to-date plan in place, backed by evidence and produced with community involvement, will stand local planning authorities in good stead in determining planning applications and at any appeal. To get enough homes built in the places where people and communities need them, a crucial first step is to plan for the right number of homes. That is why, in 2018, we introduced a standard method for assessing local housing need, to make the process of identifying the number of homes needed in an area simple, quick and transparent. The standard method shows the number of homes needed in a local planning authority and is the first step in deciding how many homes an area should plan for.

To help enable the country to deliver 300,000 homes a year, in December 2020 we changed the formula to increase the need by 35% in 20 of our most populated urban areas to maximise use of existing infrastructure and to support development that reduces the need for high-carbon travel. All other local authorities in England, including Wealden, saw no change compared to the previous method, so, in effect, continued to calculate their local housing need in the same way.

Following the 2020 consultation, the Government concluded that the 2014-based projections would continue to be used to calculate housing targets. Household projections are not just a measure of how many houses are needed to meet demand; the ONS has been clear that lower household projections do not necessarily mean fewer homes needing to be built. The standard method is used by councils as a guide when they develop their local plans. That means that councils decide their own housing requirement once they have their local need, with the expectation that the inspector should also consider the local circumstances and the constraints that really matter to local people. The council should also consider working with neighbouring authorities if it would be more appropriate for the needs to be met elsewhere.

I want to add that I know that Councillor Standley and Councillor Newton of Wealden District Council are doing their utmost to deliver the homes they need

for their areas, and I reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden that the Department will continue to support the work of her council, now and into the future.

Building the homes this country needs is at the heart of the Government's commitment to levelling up across the United Kingdom. The planning policy framework still expects local authorities to demonstrate a five-year housing land supply against the housing requirement. Therefore, following consultations with communities, local authorities need to get a local plan in place and allocate appropriate sites. When a local authority finds itself unable to demonstrate a five-year housing land supply and engages the presumption in favour of sustainable development, that does not mean that planning permission is automatically granted. Each case is considered on its merits, and only planning matters may be taken into consideration. When any adverse impacts of granting approval would significantly or demonstrably outweigh the benefits, or if national policies protecting important assets provide a clear reason for refusal of an application when assessed against the national policies taken as a whole, the application should be refused.

For as long as local authorities fail to demonstrate a five-year housing land supply, they will be more at risk of appeals and speculative planning applications being successful. That said, we are reviewing the planning system, including the role of the five-year housing land supply policy, and considering its alignment with and support of the levelling-up agenda.

The housing delivery test is a scheme that is designed to encourage authorities to focus on supporting the build-out of deliverable schemes with planning permission, but also to be realistic about likely rates of delivery from sites in those plans. It aims to offer greater transparency on the actual housing delivery in an area and to ensure that communities' local housing need is being delivered in a local planning authority area. It therefore does not necessarily just measure permissions.

The Government are clear that developers should build out permissions as quickly as possible. That is an area in which I am taking a personal interest. When planning permission has been granted for new developments or when sites are stalled or experiencing delays in being delivered, it is for local authorities and developers to work closely together at a local level to overcome the barriers, as they are best placed to achieve that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wealden talked passionately about infrastructure, and contributions from developers play an important role in developing the infrastructure that new homes require. Local authorities can obtain contributions by charging a community infrastructure levy on new developments and by negotiating section 106 planning obligations with a developer. According to its 2021 infrastructure funding statement,

Wealden District Council collected over £5 million in community infrastructure levy in that year, plus over £3.4 million from section 106 agreements.

I know that my hon. Friend has called for the Government to explore the whole issue of the introduction of a new infrastructure levy, which will replace section 106 planning obligations and the community infrastructure levy. The proposed levy will be simpler, more transparent and more consistent. I would like to reassure her that I recognise the importance of the timely delivery of infrastructure through developer contributions. That will be an important consideration in the design of the new levy. In my constituency, I know people feel frustrated that often the infrastructure comes way too late, or perhaps not at all, to meet the demands.

My hon. Friend kindly invited me to visit her constituency; I will be delighted to do so at some point, although she did not quite sell it with the misery line. Even so, I would be more than happy to come.

I thank, again, both my hon. Friends for fighting for their constituencies and for raising this important topic for debate. The Government recognise that we need a modernised planning system. We are considering how best to take forward proposals for changes to the planning system. An announcement on next steps will be made in due course. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden also previously suggested that numbers for local authorities reflecting the housing an area needs should be advisory, not mandatory. I want to take this opportunity to reassure her that I have heard the concerns loud and clear, not just from her but from many colleagues in the last three weeks.

My hon. Friend also raised the important point about older people. She may be interested to know that we are developing an older people's taskforce to see what we can do to help in that important area. She raised the possibility of a stamp duty reduction for last-time buyers. She will be aware that that is a decision for the Treasury and is a bit beyond my purview. I sincerely encourage her to have a constructive debate with our Treasury colleagues on that issue.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to speak on this subject again. As the new Minister in the Department, I am keen to understand the issues in her area and in other areas around the country as we try to find a planning policy and system that works for the whole country, delivers the houses we need for our local people and ensures we have the economic prosperity that that will bring. I look forward to working with her over the coming years.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

International Mother Language Day

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

2.36 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered International Mother Language Day 2022.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I start by wishing everyone happy St David's day—I can see many of my Welsh colleagues here. I begin my remarks by speaking the language of my parents—Sylheti—for what I understand could be for the first time in a UK parliamentary debate by simply saying,

“Ekta basha kuno dino jotheshsto oy na”.

In English, that means, “One language is never enough”.

I am delighted to have secured this debate about Language Martyrs Day and International Mother Language Day on the date that those remembrances fall—21 February, or Ekushey February in Bangla, when 70 years ago this year political activists and students in Dhaka were killed while demanding official status for their mother tongue Bangla. Honouring those Bengali students martyred in 1952 has, of course, deep personal meaning for me as a British Bangladeshi growing up in, and now representing, an area with a large Bengali-speaking community. Every day I feel acutely a deep sense of responsibility from knowing that I owe so much personally to those who came before me, who had to struggle to keep our culture and language alive, facing prejudice, discrimination and state repression.

The language of my family—Sylheti—is spoken by an estimated 11 million people, primarily in the Sylhet district of Bangladesh and, of course, around the world by a diaspora community, including in my constituency of Poplar and Limehouse. In fact, we are lucky in east London to be one of the most linguistically vibrant areas and communities in the entire country, with at least 90 identified different languages being used in Tower Hamlets alone.

Globally, there are a wonderful 6,500 spoken languages in the world today, and each is superbly unique in a number of exciting ways. Language is one of the most important parts of any culture and society, and it is critical for our daily lives as we continually seek to further understand and improve the world around us. The words that we use are constantly evolving and changing. New words are created to describe new things, and old words invariably take on new meanings. The nuances and multiple levels on which a single word can operate are just incredible. Our language can be remarkably simple and extraordinarily complex, and sometimes both at the same time. Words can be extremely specific, and yet they can mean almost anything and everything in between. Language diversity is at the heart of this human brilliance.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I am glad that the hon. Member said that old words can grow new meanings. In this place, I have actually asked Members on the Government side, “Is having a curry on the veranda of my bungalow, with some chutney and a lager, English?” Clearly, it is English, but it is also a huge number of

other languages, which have contributed to the mix that is English and to the mix that is Welsh, as I will explain later.

Apsana Begum: I thank the hon. Member for making such an important point, which is actually a running theme of my words here today.

I know people who tell me that there are things they can say in their mother language that they cannot say in English, and that there are things they can say in English that they cannot say in their parents' language. And there is no doubt that we are richer for the range of people who call Britain home but carry in their hearts the language of another land. So, Language Martyrs Day and International Mother Language Day emphasise the significance of protecting, nurturing and embracing different cultures, languages and ways of life.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very important speech. I am proud to be a Member of Parliament in England, for Stockport. At home, my parents speak Hindi, which is one of the languages of India; indeed, it is the main language. I believe that Hindi is the fourth most spoken language in the world—over 341 million people speak it as their native language—and I am proud to be able to speak it, read it and write it in addition to English.

The point I am trying to make is the point that my hon. Friend made about protecting and respecting other cultures and languages. On this point, does she agree that the persecution in China of people who teach or want to speak Tibetan, which is the native language of Tibet, has to stop, because freedom of expression, freedom of association and freedom of religion are fundamental rights?

Apsana Begum: My hon. Friend makes a very important point and I hope that the Minister can address it in her remarks.

As I was saying, Language Martyrs Day and International Mother Language Day emphasise the significance of protecting, nurturing and embracing different cultures, languages and ways of life, accepting ourselves and accepting each other, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) has just said.

As the MP for a diverse and dynamic constituency, for me every day highlights the benefits of celebrating our various cultural heritages and linguistic diversity, learning from different traditions of living together and interacting with each other, and—importantly—nurturing the language and culture that grow out of those experiences. In short, multiculturalism is a privilege, not a problem, and diversity of language makes the collective fabric of our society stronger.

Yet the last few years have seen a growing trend whereby there are some attempts to engage in the so-called “culture wars”, with anti-immigration rhetoric being used as a smokescreen to hide society's wider failings, legitimising racist attitudes and exacerbating social marginalisation.

Unfortunately, language can be used as a tool to construct certain people as “the other” and to force them to assimilate. All around the world, states have often restricted official use of minority languages, because of the idea that it is necessary to use only specified

languages. The pandemic exposed the fact that many minority language speakers continue to be excluded from learning and accessing crucial information, which has had significant implications, for example for the roll-out of the vaccine and the fact that people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds have faced greater risks and endured greater hardships.

Language diversity plays a key role in people's identity and it plays a similarly key role in our wellbeing and mental health. That is why it is vital that local and public provision of community language services is free at the point of use and that digital technology is made widely available for multi-lingual learning. At a time when many people are worried about knife crime, radicalisation and many young people's lack of a sense of belonging, it is devastating that these sorts of services are being cut and privatised. Indeed, local community language services, which were a huge part of my life growing up and of the lives of so many people around me, have now been outsourced and cut, making them another casualty of the programme of public sector cuts that has been disastrous for everyone. I find that particularly sad because it was through such services that I myself learned to speak, read and write Bangla, and it is my constant wish that my Bangla and Sylheti skills were better than they actually are.

The opportunity to use one's own language and the language of one's family can be of crucial importance for individual and collective identity and culture, as well as participation in public life. Language services help to provide people with an understanding of their first language and culture, raise educational attainment and promote inclusion, because when people understand their community language, they understand their community and their elders better. Of course, during the covid crisis, language barriers and challenges regarding intergenerational communication were part of putting certain segments of our communities at greater risk. Multilingual education based on people's mother tongues is therefore a key component of inclusion in education.

The United Nations and others have long argued that education based on the first language or mother tongue must begin from the early years of every child's life. The theme of this year's International Mother Language Day is "Using technology for multilingual learning: challenges and opportunities", which speaks to the role of technology in advancing multilingual education. School closures have been a prominent feature of the covid-19 crisis, and while communities around the world had to use technology-based solutions to maintain continuity of learning, too many lacked the necessary equipment means such as laptops and other items, internet access and accessible materials. As such, many of us campaigned for everyone to have access to the internet and to the technology needed. In today's world, fast, reliable broadband is not a desirable extra but a fundamental requirement for a decent life, and it is most certainly vital for education and linguistic development. That is why the Labour party's 2019 manifesto pledged to offer free and fast broadband to every household in the country by 2030—a pledge, and a manifesto, that I was very proud to stand on.

It is also crucial to recognise the role of specialist language media outlets in providing high-quality journalism and addressing the issues that different communities face. In the face of an increasingly politically and culturally

homogenous media landscape, media diversity is key to empowering everyone, and it plays a key role in reaching out to, informing, including and representing ethnic minority communities in particular. There is a great need for the histories, cultures and languages of those communities to feature much more across the whole educational curriculum, local services and the cultural sector.

Language Martyrs Day and International Mother Language Day emerge from a history of jostling powers and political struggles. I think about how the Black Lives Matter protests all over the world recognised the importance of the inclusion of diverse cultural storytelling through their demand to ensure that school curriculums include educating young people about racism and imperialism. There is a need to rebalance historical and social narratives that currently exclude certain experiences and perspectives. We all have a duty to make sure that the next generation, at least, has a better understanding of the historical injustices that contribute to the institutional racism that persists in the UK and elsewhere today.

Ultimately, Language Martyrs Day and International Mother Language Day is an opportunity to see the rich tapestry of our linguistic diversity as something to be cherished—a joyful kaleidoscope of possibilities and potential to be revelled in. People, with all our diversity and rich traditions, have much more to gain by standing together than being divided. We do not have to be alike to have the same interests and shared sense of solidarity.

2.49 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): As ever, it is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, and I take the opportunity to wish everybody in Westminster Hall a dydd Gŵyl Dewi hapus iawn—a very happy St David's day, very appropriate for today's debate.

I join colleagues in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) on having secured this important debate. She made some incredibly important points about the real benefits of second, third and even fourth languages in keeping our country's cultural diversity at the very forefront. As a very proud Welsh MP, it would feel remiss not to use this opportunity to highlight the incredible work of the Labour Government in Wales and how they are doing their bit to keep the brilliant Welsh language alive and kicking.

Earlier today, my wonderful friend and colleague, the Minister for Education in Welsh Government, announced major new projects to grow the Welsh language that include bold plans to open new Welsh-medium schools, creating more opportunities for adult learners and supporting the Urdd, Wales's largest national youth organisation, with an extra £1.2 million. That is just a small insight into what incredible work a Labour Government can do for our cultural heritage, and I am especially proud today to see those amazing policy commitments in action.

Indeed, colleagues may be surprised to learn that Welsh is actually undergoing a resurgence of its own, with Welsh being the fastest-growing language, according to research by popular language app, Duolingo. The number of people learning Welsh rose particularly during lockdown; it saw a whopping 44% increase in 2020, with Welsh beating Hindi, Japanese, French and Turkish. I would like to declare my own interest as a keen Welsh learner trying to improve my fluency in the language.

[Alex Davies-Jones]

As is the case with so many other languages, the Welsh language is at the very heart of Welsh culture and identity, from phrases used to cheer on our sports teams, “Cymru am byth” to “iechyd da”, a personal favourite of mine, and my favourite word in any language, “cwtch”. We cannot forget our proud national anthem, “Mae Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau”, which translates as “The Land of my Fathers”, proudly written by two of Pontypridd’s residents, Evan and James. It just goes to show how beautiful, vibrant, and full of variety our Welsh language truly is.

In Wales, we are very lucky to see the Welsh-medium channel S4C continue to thrive, although given the Government’s lack of awareness when it comes to the future funding of the BBC, perhaps the less said on that the better. That aside, I am particularly proud that Welsh is undergoing an overdue resurgence, but of course, none of that could happen without a bold commitment by the Welsh Labour Government to invest in our heritage. The Welsh Language Minister and the Senedd have set an incredible goal to reach 1 million Welsh speakers by 2050, which is around a third of Wales’s current population. It is only with that type of commitment that languages like Welsh can continue to flourish and reach new households, and I am very proud to say that I have seen my own Welsh skills recently develop thanks to the campaign to get us all learning.

The ambition and commitment do not stop there. A few weeks ago, the Welsh Labour Government announced that free Welsh lessons would be made available to anyone aged 16 to 25 and to all education practitioners. That is an incredible effort, and only possible thanks to the Labour Government and to the National Centre for Learning Welsh, which launched an incredibly successful online taster course for teachers and leaders back in February 2020.

Not everyone has the chance to learn Welsh from a young age, and many of us decide to give it a go later in life after building up an understanding of the value of being able to use Welsh in daily conversations. I would urge anyone who is tempted to join the 1.5 million people who have, to date, started learning Welsh on Duolingo to just give it a go. You absolutely never know where a second language—especially Welsh—may take you. Diolch.

2.53 pm

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): I fell into today’s debate just like I fell into languages upon becoming an adult, and I thank the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) for bringing this debate to the Chamber today. It is a very fun debate, and I am most interested to hear and learn what everyone has to say.

The hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) referred to pride, and I was wondering, what am I proud of? I am proud of being a sometimes English-speaking MP from Northern Ireland, representing the constituency of Bolton North East, who in any given week probably spends about 20% of his time speaking Mandarin Chinese because that is what I speak with my daughter at home. It is probably more standard than my English.

From a very personal perspective, I absolutely understand the sheer importance of learning languages. On leaving university, I spent roughly 14,000 hours trying to learn Mandarin Chinese; I read and write about 4,000 Chinese characters, and read the newspaper or whatever else, and I have gained a huge amount from the capacity to improve cognitive ability.

The Minister will understand what I am about to say. As someone who was born and grew up in Northern Ireland, I know that language and culture can often be politicised, unfortunately. In my own case, I come from an Ulster Scots or a Protestant Unionist background in the town of Ballymena in County Antrim, and when I was growing up we did not learn Gaelic at school. We never came across the Irish language. Therefore, when we met people from the other community if they had what, to us, looked like a nuanced sort of name, we did not know how to pronounce it half the time.

Three years ago, I took it upon myself to spend a week in Glencolumbkille in Donegal, on the west coast of Ireland, trying to learn Irish Gaelic. Do you know what, Sir Edward? It is more difficult than Mandarin Chinese. Perhaps it is just because I am getting old, but I was humbled by the experience. At least Chinese characters look different from the word go, so there an expectation; Gaelic has what look like English-language letters, but when I tried to read them my teacher told me I was getting them completely wrong.

The personal dimension is very important, and my first message to my fellow countrymen in Northern Ireland is to be open to different languages and cultures. When people as their native tongue have English, which is the hegemonic language of the world and spoken more than any other language as a second language, they have nothing to be worried or scared about. The British Council, among others, does a fantastic job at projecting soft power across the world.

My constituency of Bolton North East has one of the largest and most flourishing Indian Gujarati Muslim communities in the United Kingdom, bar a very few of the 650 constituencies out there. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse said that sometimes people are sceptical about diversity or have a fear of it, but I am the complete opposite. I see nothing but opportunity. I think of my Gujarati community, along with a significant Pakistani community, as a massive opportunity for us, especially at a time when south Asia and its distinctive economies have such a promising future in what is already shaping up to be the Asian-Eurasian century in front of us.

My own shortcoming on this is that I have had on my desk here in Westminster, for the last year and a half, a book about learning Urdu. When I asked people if I should learn Hindi or Gujarati, they said, “They are all beautiful languages, but Urdu is slightly more beautiful.” I am not sure if the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) would agree with that.

Navendu Mishra: I would like to share the fact that Hindi and Urdu are very similar when spoken, but they are written differently. Hindi is written left to right, but Urdu is based on the Arabic script and it is right to left. I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to learn either, then he will be able to speak both, but he will have to do a lot more work when it comes to writing.

Mark Logan: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who also represents a Greater Manchester constituency. If I am ever in the market for a teacher, I will know who to look to. My constituency has a huge advantage when it comes to linguistic diversity.

Finally, in thinking of the world, the environment in which we live and the announcements made by the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary today about opening our arms even further to the Ukrainian people, in my constituency I have one of the most established Ukrainian diasporas in the United Kingdom outside of London. I attended a rally on Saturday with the Bolton Ukrainian Social Club and Cultural Centre, headed up by Yaroslav Tymchyshyn. As the number of people coming from Ukraine to the United Kingdom inevitably increases, there is an opportunity, in the words of the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, to add to that “rich tapestry” of the United Kingdom. We have always to be open to change, because change is the only constant. Linguistic diversity has added so much not just to the culture of the United Kingdom, but to our economics and future prosperity. I again thank the hon. Lady for securing the debate.

2.59 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) on securing this important debate.

Languages and multilingualism can advance inclusion and cohesion. The diversity of languages spoken in towns such as Luton, where I come from, acts as an avenue to strengthening and enhancing community cohesion. We are very proud of our town’s diversity and global outlook. In Luton, over 100 languages are spoken and our diversity is our strength.

I was introduced to the celebration of International Mother Language Day by friends in the Bangladeshi community in Luton. Only this weekend, the Purbachal—The Eastern Sky cultural group and the United Nations Association—Luton held an International Mother Language Day celebration event. The theme for the event was “valuing identity, culture, diversity and peace”, which was very appropriate for this time, although the association was using technology, because it was over Zoom. The opportunity to learn about the other languages and cultures that contribute to an area’s identity helps to create shared understanding and respect. In my short contribution to the event, I reflected on the fact that my own mother language, English, is derived from many other languages, including the old Germanic languages, Norse, Latin, French and some ancient Greek, and the point about words evolving is really important.

On the need to develop understanding of languages, we have many local groups in Luton that are key to this endeavour. The Centre for Youth Community and Development is a community group that provides enormous benefits to our diverse communities in Luton. It delivers many services, including educational programmes, English language lessons and activities for our young people. However, one of the most important things that it has done recently is social and heritage history projects, particularly around oral history. People learn about the social development of different generations, which is

spoken—it is not possible to write it down. The important thing is being able to speak in the mother language of the elders from the community. If we do not retain those links and the ability to speak the languages of the generations above us, we will lose them.

Very pertinently, I visited the Luton branch of the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain on Sunday to express my solidarity with the community and support their donation drive as they came together. I listened to accounts of the invasion by Putin and the fear that some people’s family members had back in Ukraine, but one of conversations I had with some of the people there was about their pride in the importance of retaining their Ukrainian language with their children to ensure that their children can communicate with their grandparents back in Ukraine. That is prevalent in many different languages, particularly in Luton, where we have many supplementary schools to facilitate learning a language, whether Bangla, Ukrainian, Turkish, Polish, Greek or Tamil. For young children to learn the language of their parents and grandparents so that they are fluent, as we have heard Members say, is really important for remembering these connections. However, it is absolutely right that I make the point that more than 10 years of Tory austerity, with 60p in every £1 being cut from local authorities, have had a detrimental impact on language learning, because the discretionary grants that local authorities were able to make have been taken away, which has been damaging for many of our young children.

On that basis, I would like to hear what the Minister has to say about the impact of 10 years of Tory austerity, and of the cuts to local authorities, on community language schools and supplementary schools, particularly the impact on intergenerational communication and cohesion. Similarly, if we talk about learning and remembering one’s mother language, we have to reflect on the fact that funding across England for providers of English for speakers of other languages, or ESOL, was slashed from £202 million in 2008 to only £105 million in 2018—a real-terms cut of almost 60%. Ensuring that English language lessons are accessible should be a priority for the Government. Either way, it is critical for people to engage in society and fulfil their potential, so I hope that the Minister will outline what steps the Government are taking to ensure that nobody is left behind due to language barriers.

Hon. Members have talked about the languages they have learned. I studied French as a younger person, but the most important thing I learned on Sunday was how to say hello in Ukrainian, so I will leave you with “*pryvit*”.

3.5 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I thank you, Sir Edward, and congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) on securing this interesting and important debate. It is interesting and important because language is so intimately tied up with identity. I congratulate the hon. Members who have taken part so far on the positive tone of the debate. I come from a country where language has been a contentious issue for many years—something that has now largely passed, I am glad to say.

I am glad that we are debating mother tongues, or what are sometimes called minority languages, lesser used languages in the European Union term, and autochthonous

[Hywel Williams]

languages, which I use as a former academic. It is a lovely term, which means arising from the land it comes from. In that respect, Welsh and English in Wales are both autochthonous languages, as are other languages that have been mentioned.

I am also glad that we are discussing this on Dydd Gŵyl Dewi, our national saint's day, St David's day. In Wales, we have a wealth of understanding of the nature of bilingualism, or rather multilingualism. Bilingualism is just a special case of multilingualism. We also know a lot about translation, machine translation, the technology of simultaneous translation, bilingualism, IT and education, through two languages or one at a time.

We also have experience of devising new terms and growing new meanings on old terms. It is one of the abiding joys of my life that I occasionally see terms that I devised a long time ago, going past on paper from Government publications on social matters. It is humbling to know that I have added one or two to the million entries in the University of Wales dictionary of Welsh, which comes in four volumes and is available upstairs in the Members' Library, if anybody is interested. I think they bought it especially for me.

It is multilingualism, for many languages are spoken in Wales and the UK, although in Wales only two have legal status, while others are extensively catered for. My argument is that if two are conceded rather than one, why not concede three? Why not make provision in particular circumstances for three or more? The important point is that multilingualism is the normal condition throughout the world. It is the UK's sometimes suffocating monolingualism that is the exception. There is monolingualism in a large number of other countries as well, although they are a minority.

I have already suggested, in the moments that I have been on my feet, a number of directions that this debate could take. To refer to legal status and its complexities, if we wish to discuss real change we have to think about changing the law, to give rights. It is only through rights that one can secure provision. Welsh language legislation has always been confined to Wales and to the Welsh language. That is how this place has historically treated the language issue. If we are to have proper provision for people who speak the wealth of languages spoken in the UK, we have to think about changing the law. As an old hand in these matters, I suggest that to the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse.

Other languages at present do not count in the same way, although there are variations. In Canada, bilingualism exists broadly throughout the country in a limited sense, but much more intensively in Quebec, but Welsh is confined to Wales. I will refer briefly, as an example, to the Welsh Language Act 1967, which provided equal validity to Welsh, so that if something was done in Welsh, it was as if it was done in English. It was equally valid, though not equal. A provision in that very short Act also said that, in the case of a divergence between the two texts,

"the English text shall prevail".

That was how the question of equality was dealt with. It could lead to the ridiculous situation that the English says "two and two is five" and the Welsh "dau a dau yn bedwar", and the answer would be five rather than four,

because in the case of a divergence between the two texts, the English shall prevail. That is a hard case, and it is a bad law in that respect. The Welsh Language Act 1993 brought in the principle of

"treated on a basis of equality".

That is not equality, but "on a basis of". That is essentially how it stands. It is something that one can work with.

I want to refer the Minister to a couple of private Members' Bills that I have brought in. Perhaps at least one of them might be revisited at some point, either by me or by the Ministry of Justice, if it is interested. It is a reform of the Juries Act 1974. The Act provides that juries must be able to understand English: that is, the language-understanding principle has been conceded. There is a qualification—that jurors must be able to understand English. Judges can disqualify jurors if they do not understand English. The principle of having to understand the language has been conceded.

The question therefore is, how many languages? I would say, in Wales, two at least—and possibly more. Some years ago, I therefore proposed the Bilingual Juries (Wales) Bill, which would in some cases mean that all members of a jury should be bilingual on the basis of the 1974 Act. The principle is that the jury should understand the evidence as directly as possible in the language in which it is presented, not through the medium of a translator, however good translators are. The law on the Welsh language has been reviewed recently by Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd, who provided a substantial report to the Welsh Government. He did not suggest bilingual juries, by the way, but I think he went quite far in that direction. It is worth having a quick look at that again.

One thing that strikes me regularly is that whenever the use of more than one language is discussed—particularly, I would say, on the BBC—the participants seem to feel the need to find interesting but very distanced examples of languages in New Guinea, Australia or China, and the wealth that we have in the UK, and in Wales in particular, is usually ignored. We have a variety of languages in Wales, and not exclusively in urban areas. I represent a rural area, and there are people who speak a variety of languages. They include people who were born in Wales whose home language is another one.

Indeed, as an interested Welsh speaker, I have occasionally said in this place—sometimes to the surprise of the other side—that English is a Welsh language. If hon. Members ponder that for a moment, they will see the reasoning behind it. In that sense, I would also say that Polish, Urdu, Kurdish, Italian, Sylheti and all the others are also Welsh languages. Language is a social construction; it is something that we all agree on that we can use. In that respect, all languages require and deserve respect, and the ability for people to use them.

I have talked much too long already, and I could go on for a very long time. However, I draw hon. Members' attention to something that some might not have noticed. This House operates bilingually as well—at times, at least. It is a bit under the radar. The Welsh Grand Committee operates in Welsh and English. My last speech to the Committee was entirely in Welsh, and the majority of Members who contributed did so fully or partly in Welsh as well. The Welsh Affairs Committee also regularly enables the use of two languages. The House's education department has taken great strides in providing education material bilingually, although when

the education centre was built around the back of the House of Lords, I suggested that simultaneous translation facilities should be incorporated—they were on demand in one of the lecture rooms—but to no avail. When Welsh is used in the Palace, we build a temporary shed in the corner of the Committee room, complete with snaking wires across the floor to trip anybody who is unwary.

There are alternatives. In Wales, I am used to having bilingual committee meetings of four or five people, and the fifth—or the fourth, even—is a translator who sits in the corner whispering into a microphone, so that people have translation through discreet wireless headphones. It is possible to do without a shed in the corner and wires all over the place.

We need to look at normalising that sort of provision, not just for Welsh but for any language, to enable anyone to contribute. Translation is a boon. It is useful and, in the end, it is a concession for those who do not speak the other language. I can manage well enough in Welsh, and fairly well in English, but translation is a boon for the people who cannot manage. If we bear that principle in mind, the changes to practice become obvious.

3.16 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Diolch yn fawr, Cadeirydd; thank you very much, Chair. I am delighted to join this debate celebrating International Mother Language Day. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) on securing the debate, giving her the opportunity to emphasise the importance of the Sylheti language to so many of her constituents. Diolch yn fawr.

UNESCO, which, along with the UN, adopted International Mother Language Day following the initiative by Bangladesh, states that it

“believes in the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity for sustainable societies”

and states:

“Linguistic diversity is increasingly threatened as more and more languages disappear.”

That is why I wish to take this opportunity, particularly on St David’s day—dydd Gŵyl Dewi—to talk about the importance of our Welsh language. We cannot underestimate the importance of language to human relationships.

I will give an example of my own experience. My own grandparents—my Mam-gu and Tad-cu—spoke only Welsh in the house. For my mother, it was the language of the home. The bond and nature of the relationship between them is closely linked to their use of the Welsh language. That relationship changed when they spoke English, which was very rare. It was unnatural to them and very uncomfortable. The Welsh language, with its richness of culture, was a vital part of their identity.

The Welsh language story is one of survival, as it is for so many other languages—survival against oppression and prejudice. An example of that is the Welsh not, which was used in schools in the 19th century. Throughout the week, schoolchildren who were caught speaking Welsh had to wear the Welsh not around their neck, and the one who was wearing it at end of the week received a punishment. I am really glad that that is not in existence any more.

The language survived the emigration of Welsh-speaking people to find work after the first world war, and it has survived the inward migration to small rural communities, where Welsh has often remained a first language. The buying up of second homes and the break-up of communities make it impossible for younger people to afford to live in their own communities. The Welsh Government are introducing legislation to try to address that issue. The Welsh language has survived the prejudice of a lack of financial support over decades, as colleagues have mentioned, particularly in the last decade or so of austerity cuts.

On a positive note, thanks to Welsh Government initiatives and campaigning by individuals and organisations such as Cymdeithas yr Iaith, the Welsh language lives on—mae’r iaith yn cadw’n fyw. Welsh is Britain’s oldest language, but it is a living language in daily use. Just under 30% of the population of Wales are able to speak Welsh, and around half a million people use the language daily.

Although my mother received Welsh-medium education at primary school, that was not an option at secondary school. I am very pleased to say that over the last 60 years there has been vast progress. I and my children have received Welsh-medium education. Moreover, since 2017, the Welsh Government have developed their Welsh language strategy, “Cymraeg 2050”. The first four-year phase has the goal of 1 million Welsh speakers by 2050.

I also welcome today’s announcement of the significant additional funding to promote Welsh-medium education support for the work of the Urdd, which is the youth organisation for Wales, by the Minister for Education and Welsh Language.

The use of technology for multilingual learning is the focus of International Mother Language Day 2022, so it is worth noting the increasing spread of Welsh in online learning apps and language podcasts. As I have already mentioned, we have our own Welsh language TV channel, S4C, and the passing of the Welsh Language Act 1993 gave Welsh and English almost equal status, shall we say? That has since been strengthened and updated. In 2011, the Welsh Government established the role of the Welsh Language Commissioner. I would wish, here, to express my sadness at the sudden death on 14 February this year of Aled Roberts, who was the Commissioner since 2019, and had such a depth of love and passion for the Welsh language.

Briefly, our National Eisteddfod epitomises our love of our language. Its poetry and music, and the Llangollen International Eisteddfod, is a mark of Wales’ internationalist tradition. In fact, the first of the reincarnations of the National Eisteddfod actually took place in my constituency in Aberdare in 1861.

I will indulge myself, so let me take this opportunity to share my love and joy of the Welsh language. Wales is sometimes called the land of song—Gwlad y Gân—or, as the Welsh national anthem states, “Gwlad beirdd a chantorion”, the land of poets and singers. The language really does sing to me, particularly through its poetry. That is not only because it sounds so beautiful but because the messages from many of the Welsh poets are also beautiful.

I will read an extract from a poem by Jacob Davies, who was a Unitarian minister and, like so many Welsh poets, had a strong desire to see a more equal and just

[Beth Winter]

world, where peace and compassion for our fellow human beings ruled supreme. He said:

“A phan ddaw plant y byd yn grwn

I ganu can o hedd,

Anghofir am y rhannu blin

O achos lliw a gwedd.

O dewch blant o liwiau'r haul

A holl deuluoedd dyn,

I ganu can ein gobaith cu

Fod plant y byd yn un.”

It speaks of children, of all parts of the world, from all families of humankind coming together as one, forgetting our divisions, and singing a song of peace. Diolch yn fawr.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): We have two more speakers and some eight minutes left, so please try to bear that in mind.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): O seun, Sir Edward, and o seun fun ore mi, Apsana. That was “Thank you, Sir Edward” and “thank you to my friend”—to my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum), who called this debate—in Yoruba, my late mother’s native tongue. I note that the Minister has recently returned from Ghana and Nigeria, so I say to her, “kaabo” and “akwaaba” which mean “welcome” in both Yoruba and Twi.

My constituency of Vauxhall is a community made whole by a multitude of multilingual people. Nobody living in Stockwell during the finals of Euro 2016 could have failed to notice the vibrant Portuguese community that calls my constituency home. Vauxhall is also home to large Jamaican, Nigerian, Ghanaian, Italian, Ecuadorian, Somali, Ethiopian and Eritrean communities.

Our schools are home to over 50 languages, spoken by the children of migrants from right across the world. As a result, no one can fail to be exposed to a number of different languages spoken by native speakers walking through the streets of Brixton, Stockwell, Kennington, Clapham, or even just across the river from here, in Waterloo, in my constituency.

Far from the predictions of the doomsayers on multiculturalism, my constituency thrives from that diversity of language and culture. Rather than create a division, the multilingual nature of Vauxhall has harboured tolerance and respect among my constituents. It has allowed diverse businesses to thrive, and exposed all of us to cultures from around the world without even leaving our neighbourhoods. Most importantly, it means that, wherever someone comes from, they will find a home in Vauxhall, whatever language they speak. Whether it is Portuguese, Italian, Somali, or my late mother’s native tongue of Yoruba, our mother tongues should be celebrated. However, around the world, we are seeing mother tongues marginalised and discriminated against, often with disastrous consequences.

The theme of this year’s International Mother Language Day 2022 is technology and multilingual learning. That is so important after we have seen much learning activity move online due to measures taken to combat covid-19. Lambeth is home to one of the largest Portuguese-speaking populations in the UK. However, some of those

Portuguese-speaking pupils are also the lowest-attaining pupil group in Lambeth. Last October, at Vauxhall Primary School, I attended the launch of Lambeth Schools Partnership’s Somos Lambeth, which celebrates and fosters the rise in the achievement and profile of Portuguese-speaking pupils in Lambeth, and supports family and community collaboration.

Unfortunately, reports from UNESCO found that children in education who did not speak a major or national language in their country did not have the same vital access to education as their peers. It is unacceptable for young people to miss out simply for not speaking their mother tongue in the country that they are in. I have one ask for the Minister this afternoon. Will she work with the Government and our international partners to improve access to education for speakers of all languages? E seun, Sir Edward.

3.26 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I am not sure how long I have to wind up for the SNP, but I will assume it is about five minutes and be gentle and kind to Labour and the Conservatives—as is always my way. It was a very interesting debate and I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum)—it is absolutely fantastic that she secured it. It was inspiring to hear that Tower Hamlets has 90 languages; I am not sure that it is a competition with Vauxhall, but Tower Hamlets is winning 90 to 50. I gently say to the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) that she has another 40 to go in order to hold her head up with Poplar and Limehouse.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse also talked about the expressing of ideas in various languages; those of us who are multilingual or bilingual understand that intuitively. She said very wisely that one language is never enough. I will help: chan eil aon chànan a-riamh gu leòr, as it is in Scottish Gaelic; ní leor teanga amháin riamh, in Irish Gaelic, which my mother spoke; and, einn tungumál er aldreí nóg, in Icelandic, which I have been trying to learn in Parliament with the help of the Foreign Office. Lessons are available to Members of Parliament, incidentally, in any language. There are ups and downs of doing that. I got hammered in the *Daily Express* for it—but that is the sort of thing the *Daily Express* does anyway. However, on the upside, when people in Iceland read the *Daily Express*, I became a national hero there for 24 hours. I have to thank the *Daily Express* for pointing out—and it might want to print the article again—that I learnt Icelandic in Parliament with the Foreign Office’s help. I would encourage other Members to take that up; it is a fantastic opportunity.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse also said that culture wars were a mistake. That is absolutely right; they cut people off, as was mentioned by the hon. Member for Bolton North East (Mark Logan). I was fascinated to hear about his use of Mandarin at home—I think he has told me before. It was amazing to hear what he had to say on language. He also said that he was in Donegal to learn some Irish. I have also been to Donegal; although my mother was Irish, she was not really from a Gaeltacht area. I would say to him that he should persevere, because the spelling systems of both Scottish and Irish Gaelic are logical. The only time that English had such a system was when the monks of Iona went to Lindisfarne and sorted out the spelling for

English—which the English language has gone about messing up ever since. I am sure that the monks of Donegal, or Iona, if they were still there, might be willing to come back and help.

The hon. Member for Bolton North East also mentioned the hegemonic place of English in the world. That is an advantage but it is also a disadvantage. We cannot see into other societies as clearly as they can see into our society. We do not know the granular arguments that are going on in Oslo, Stockholm or Helsinki like they know the arguments that are going on in the UK or Washington DC. Too often, the monolingual English world loses a lot of insight as to what other people are doing. I think that is a big mistake.

The hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) emphasised that languages borrow from each other. That was no idle slogan—if I can throw in a Gaelic word. Languages do borrow from each other, and that is something very natural. People often ask me, “What is the Scottish Gaelic for helicopter?” I say to them, “What is the English for helicopter? It is a Greek word, for goodness sake.” Similarly, “television”—

Rachel Hopkins: One of the most quoted mistakes, from a certain international figure, was that there is no word in French for entrepreneur.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Very good; yes, I remember the great gift to modern democracy and politics that was that certain individual.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse was also right to make the point about funding and how the Government have to provide it. We are having a nice, celebratory debate about International Mother Language Day; maybe that phrase is benignly sexist in a way, because Scottish Gaelic was my father’s language. However, the hon. Member made the serious point about cuts of 60p in the pound. On a day of good will to the Government, perhaps the point can be made gently to them that they should ensure that languages are not left as barriers to people but rightly become the conduits to a greater understanding that they should be.

The hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) gave us a scholarly account of Welsh and multilingualism in Wales; I thought his speech was a tour de force. In fact, he devises new terms himself; he is a wordsmith. We have a wordsmith in our midst; we are very lucky. In fact, he was so scholarly that he encouraged us all to go to the library and learn some Welsh. He also emphasised that monolingualism is the exception and that most people in the world are bilingual.

I myself used to be a bilingual teacher, teaching Scottish Gaelic on the island of Mull to young children coming from English-speaking households. They could pick up Gaelic very quickly and very easily. Typically, 800 hours was the amount required for a breakthrough in Gaelic; after 2,000 hours, they were generally quite fluent. They had no problems at all and I would say that their lives were enhanced. Research from Canada and other countries shows the benefits of a bilingual education. One is improved problem-solving in maths and another is that although children study their own first language less in school, they end up being better at it; that is one of the benefits of expanding and stretching the brain, with the gymnastics—perhaps—of learning a second language.

Then there is the Juries Act 1974. I want to check this one, because the hon. Gentleman wants to change it. However, given people’s willingness to serve on juries, perhaps it might work as a perverse incentive to bilingualism; people might claim not to be bilingual to get off serving on juries. That would be my only word of caution there.

The hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) mentioned language death, family relationships and people having different ways of expressing themselves and knowing each other, due to the language they choose to use. I can remember quite vividly that, when my late parents were alive, there was an occasion when speaking around the table were myself, my mother and my father; my two sisters were not there. I was speaking Gaelic to my father and English to my mother; my parents spoke English together; and all three of us understood each other. It felt alien to me to speak English to my father. It felt a bit of work to talk to my mother in Gaelic, because I knew she had learned Gaelic; she used to envy me as a child, because I had gone from being a baby to vaulting past her in linguistic ability by the time I was four or five.

The hon. Member’s comments really brought back to me how people are comfortable in some languages and uncomfortable in others. I know that some of my own neighbours would prefer by far to use Gaelic all the time. I asked one neighbour to do an interview for radio; it was just about agriculture in the area. He asked me if the interview was in Gaelic or English. I said it was in English and he refused point blank to do it, saying he was not comfortable enough in English to do it. He said, “I dinnae want to be doing it”.

The hon. Member also mentioned how Welsh has survived the economic forces of people coming in and buying houses, which happens in many places. We see it perhaps particularly with Cornish; now it is a dead language, but we have to remember it in this debate, because it is one of the older languages of the British isles. I would put Manx in there, too; we have mentioned Irish Gaelic and Scottish Gaelic. And today, of course, we are conversing in one of the Johnny-come-lately languages to these islands, if I can gently say that, which is English; of course, it is also a very welcome language.

The hon. Member also mentioned the focus on technology. I should say that 500,000 people have started to learn Scottish Gaelic on Duolingo. It is also important if there can be spellcheckers in various programmes, to help people in their various languages. It helps and increases the use of those languages, and makes it seem that the languages are about. I say that because I know myself that if somebody joins the company and we are speaking in Gaelic, we will move to English, but that gives people an impression that there is no Gaelic about. The Welsh are renowned for not doing that; whether that is true or not, I do not know. It is possibly detrimental to the Gaelic language that we do that.

There was also mention of poetry and music. I should also put an advert in for BBC Radio nan Gàidheal, available on BBC Sounds. From 10 to 12 every weekday morning, people can listen to “A’ Mire ri Mòir”—a fantastic programme, where the best of traditional Gaelic songs can be heard. On Friday nights, if people want to chill between 6 pm and 9 pm, they can listen to “Na Dùrachdan”—that is a great programme as well. I think I am making a good case for Gaelic there.

[Angus Brendan MacNeil]

Everybody has emphasised that there are many languages about and we are very fortunate to have them, whether that is Mandarin, Irish Gaelic, Yoruba or Bangla, or any of the number that have been mentioned. In Scotland, we have seen a resurgence in Gaelic, which has been low. We have about 87,000 speakers. The Gaelic school in Glasgow is doing particularly well, having gone from 450 pupils to 1,300 in the last 10 years. A second school is on the way. In the Highlands, almost 2,000 pupils are in Gaelic medium education. My own constituency, the smallest by population in this Parliament, has 1,400 students in Gaelic medium education. The Scottish Government are planning to bring forward a new Scottish languages Bill, which will support not only Gaelic, but also the Scots language.

The hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) had some fantastic boasts about what Labour were doing in Wales. That is fantastic—every political party should have boasts on what they are doing for second languages. Languages do not belong to anybody. The hon. Member for Bolton North East, who is originally from Northern Ireland, made that point. I pay tribute to Linda Ervine in Northern Ireland who does an awful lot, from the Unionist loyalist community, for the promotion, in a sensible and mature way, of enhancing her life and the lives of those around her through the use of the old language of Ireland, while not in any way diminishing any other language—a point we all should be making.

I have often heard the opinion that it would be great if we all spoke the one language. On reflection, when we think about that, it is not true, although the language of heaven might be a separate point—the Welsh have claimed it is Welsh, actually. It would be great to see an eternal life, not where we have one language, but where we have the capacity to understand and to speak the thousands of languages that are about and to get the insights, the views and the jokes. Bilingual jokes rely on two languages; our sense of fun would certainly grow. I have never heard anybody who can speak however many languages say that they wish they could speak fewer languages. We always hear them say, “I wish I could speak more.”

As politicians, we have to look at the resource in communities across the United Kingdom of Yoruba, Bangla and so on—those 50 or 90 languages—and maintain them, and keep them. In years to come, those might be the languages of trade and commerce. They are a direct route into another community; there is a fantastic dividend for everybody, not just through the joy of knowing that language, but through the access to and communication with other people. That is essentially what language is—a communication with other people, and that communication is very special when people can use idiosyncratic and family terms together.

3.38 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I thank you for chairing today’s important debate, Sir Edward. Let me start by saying that the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) is still a legend in Iceland, as I know from personal experience.

On this day of all days, I start by saying, salaam alaikum, shalom, sat sri akaal, namaste, dobry den—and, most importantly, because it is the only other language I speak, bienvenue à notre débat d’aujourd’hui.

I was privileged to grow up in a French-speaking household. My father’s first language—his mother tongue—was French. My grandmother, who was born in Switzerland, spoke French. She also spoke eight other languages, including a language that I doubt many people have heard of, called Ladino. That was the language of the Sephardic Jewish community that left southern Spain in the 15th century and emigrated across to the Netherlands, then a Spanish colony, and to the Ottoman empire, where Jews were given sanctuary for many centuries, until the Nazis destroyed that community—among them, my own grandparents.

Today’s debate comes at a very important time. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) for securing the debate. It is right that we should be debating something as fundamental as language, which is so critical to the avoidance of conflict and the keeping of peace. As we have heard this afternoon, Britain rightly prides herself on the diversity of our communities up and down the country. It is what makes our towns and cities strong and unified, and it keeps our economy going. Many Members have made that point. We are privileged in this country to have an education system that is available to all who need it and in the language that they need it. Sadly, though, 40% of the world’s population does not have access to an education in a language they speak or understand. That has a severe impact on millions of children across the world, and it is especially damaging during their formative years.

We should also realise that this issue mainly affects people living in poverty. In Côte d’Ivoire, 55% of grade 5 students who spoke the test language at home—French—learned the basics of reading in 2010, compared with only 25% of those who spoke another language. As UNESCO put it,

“If you don’t understand, how can you learn?”

We must work with our international partners and allies to empower multilingual education and ensure that no child is ever left behind. This is especially important in communities where significant ethnic minorities are present—here in the UK, for example. The domination of an official language in countries can lead to severe social and economic disparities between those who speak the official language and those who do not.

Most disturbingly, as has already been mentioned, we have seen Governments actively repress linguistic freedom in some parts of the world. In China, the people of Tibet, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra), and Mongolia and, most recently, the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang have had their languages banned or severely restricted as part of the Chinese Government’s twisted obsession with cultural policy.

The United Nations defines

“Any deliberate act committed with intent to destroy the language”

as a clear breach of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Before this repression began, 80% of those who lived in Tibet could speak the Tibetan language. I have been there and experienced it myself, and I have heard it myself from Tibetan colleagues and friends here in the United Kingdom. Today, nine out of 10 Tibetans do not know how to write their own language. How tragic is that? Repression

like that is completely unacceptable. I would be grateful if the Minister could tell us what action the Government are taking to try to co-ordinate an international response to those affected by appalling attacks on their culture and language.

The diversity of language is not only important in keeping our societies sustainable, but it is vital for our culture and our diplomacy. It is how we put forward the case for Britain abroad. We have some brilliant and truly amazing institutions with the ability to galvanise our country's soft power, and we must start using them again. I ask the Minister: how are the Government working with our institutions abroad, the British Council, for example, to empower multilingualism?

The pandemic has shown us just how effective distance learning can be during a crisis. It kept schools going across the world. Given that this year's theme of International Mother Language Day is

"Using technology for multilingual learning",

I ask the Minister what economic and technological support is being given by the UK Government to countries that are struggling to provide remote learning for their children.

I am proud to represent Leeds North East, where over 20 languages are spoken and where some schools have more than 100 languages spoken—Carr Manor Community School, for example. It is good for our communities and our children's education and cultural prosperity. However, there is still work to do at home. As we have heard this afternoon, there are hundreds of thousands of people in our United Kingdom who have been left behind because they cannot speak English. That is severely detrimental to their physical and mental health, as well as their societal and economic wellbeing.

In London alone, as my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) mentioned in her speech, almost 350,000 people are unable to speak English, and, worryingly, around 60% of them are women. It is vital that we look to empower the over 7,000 different languages both in our country and across the world, and the Opposition stands ready to work with colleagues from right across the House to achieve this. Let me conclude by using some of the few words I have in Russian—*net voyny*, which means "no war".

3.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford):

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) and all the hon. Members for speaking. I also wish a particularly happy St David's day to all our Welsh colleagues.

It has been wonderful to hear everyone speak in so many languages. I am not going to speak in another language, but I was deeply grateful to the headteacher of the Royal School for the Deaf Derby for teaching me how to introduce myself. My name is Vicky. [*In British Sign Language: "My name is Vicky."*] Also, to the children who come each year to Chelmsford for our annual carol concert for the deaf and hearing impaired, who taught me how to say "Happy Christmas". [*In British Sign Language: "Happy Christmas."*] That is "happy", with a big smile, and then a reindeer, stroking the snow and then putting their foot down. I hope hon. Members remember that.

As the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse pointed out, International Mother Language Day was established by UNESCO in 1999. It is an annual global celebration of cultural and linguistic diversity. It was a Bangladeshi initiative inspired by Bengali students, who sacrificed their lives for the right to speak in their mother tongue in what was then East Pakistan. Those students have been honoured annually in Bangladesh since 1952 on Language Martyrs' Day, which also marks the significance of the movement as a cornerstone of Bangladeshi independence.

Successive UK Governments have a proud history of standing up for minority groups, including linguistic minorities. International Mother Language Day promotes linguistic and cultural diversity across the world. It encourages the preservation of more than 6,000 languages and promotes the need for multilingual education to aid learning and preserve cultures. This year's event focuses on the challenges and opportunities of using technology for multilingual learning. That is timely following the pandemic and the way the world has had to reimagine the way we use technology to teach and learn.

The Department for Education has invested significantly in devices to support disadvantaged students and platforms and connectivity for schools and colleges, particularly those in rural and hard to reach areas. Across the world, however, we know that many lack the equipment and internet access needed for home learning during the pandemic and more must be done to ensure quality education for all. The UK is committed to ensuring that everyone can access education and learn. Last year, despite covid, under our presidency of the G7, we committed to two important global targets to get 40 million more girls in school and 20 million more girls learning by 2026.

The impact of school closures during the pandemic means that the initiative to get girls learning is more urgent than ever. We recently launched the prestigious Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel report with the World Bank and UNICEF to provide practical, evidence-based recommendations to drive learning recovery globally. Following on from the global launch of the report, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office will be hosting in-country launch events, starting with Bangladesh on 12 March, which—the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) will like this—will be followed by events in Ghana, Tanzania, Kenya, South Africa and India.

We remain committed to our call for 12 years of quality education for all children, especially girls. Last year, the Foreign Secretary publicly committed to restoring gender equality funding to pre-cut official development assistance levels, as part of her vision to put women and girls at the heart of our international development strategy. We are delivering on this commitment to girls' education all around the world. For example, in Bangladesh, we recently announced a £54 million programme supporting access to improved education for all.

The Government recognise the many benefits of multilingualism, and International Mother Language Day is one of myriad events in which we celebrate the cultural and linguistic diversity of the UK. Doing so builds tolerance, understanding and solidarity between us. Linguistic diversity is one of the defining aspects of our country.

[Vicky Ford]

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton North East (Mark Logan) spoke of his valiant efforts to learn Irish. I, too, have spent many a summer in Donegal, but have never tried to learn Irish—it is an incredibly challenging subject, but I encourage him to keep going. We remain committed to linguistic diversity and protecting minority languages across the UK, including Cornish, Manx Gaelic, Scots Gaelic, Scots, Ulster Scots, Irish and Welsh. Today, there are over 300 languages spoken in our schools.

As it is St David's day, I remind colleagues that Welsh is the oldest indigenous language of these British Isles. It is also one of the oldest in Europe, and since 2011 it has been a language protected by law and has had equal status to English in Wales. The UK Government are supporting the Welsh language, including the aim of achieving 1 million Welsh speakers by 2050, and the Government have also increased the use of that language in public debate—including in the House of Commons, as was seen most recently in the Welsh Grand Committee debate held on 18 January 2022. The hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) spoke about the many people who turned to learning the Welsh language via the Duolingo app during lockdown; my own husband contributed to that great effort.

Our country is blessed by the dynamism and contributions of our many diaspora communities, and I again thank the 600,000 British people of Bangladeshi origin who live in the UK. Our diversity makes it easier for us to forge meaningful and productive partnerships with countries across the world—again, I return to Bangladesh, because over recent months we have celebrated the golden jubilee of Bangladesh's independence and of UK-Bangladesh relations. For the past five decades, the UK and Bangladesh have worked together as friends and partners to overcome challenges and help our countries to become more secure and prosperous.

Bangladesh has made remarkable progress. It has lifted millions of people out of poverty and made giant leaps forward in life expectancy. It has built a dynamic economy that is among the fastest growing in the world. It has supported international peace and stability, being the largest contributor to UN peacekeepers. Over recent years, Bangladesh has showed incredible generosity by hosting nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, and we have stood with Bangladesh, contributing £320 million to its refugee programme. We have worked particularly closely with Bangladesh over the past year in response to the covid pandemic and to tackle climate change, and the UK is proud to partner with Bangladesh on so many fronts.

The hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) spoke about the situation in Tibet. We have very serious concerns about that situation, including

about reports of the erosion of the Tibetan language and culture. We continue to urge China to respect fundamental rights across China, in line with its own constitution and international frameworks. The hon. Gentleman specifically asked what the Government are doing to co-ordinate international efforts: maybe he is in two countries at once, because earlier today, the Foreign Secretary expressed her concern about human rights violations in Tibet at the Human Rights Council taking place in Geneva today.

At this time, all across the UK, we are thinking about the really brave people in Ukraine. Ukraine is a multilingual nation, with both Ukrainian and Russian spoken widely in many households. Ukraine does not restrict Russian as a language used by citizens; Russian is spoken frequently in the street and freely in people's homes. Millions of Ukrainians across the country speak Russian as their first language and face no problems. Let me use my language very clearly: we call on Putin to remove his troops and stop the violence. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] We in the UK stand firmly with the people of Ukraine, and are proud to be stepping up our role and playing our part in responding to the terrible situation on the ground. Yesterday, the UK announced the first phase of bespoke humanitarian routes for the people of Ukraine, responding directly to the needs and asks of the Ukrainian Government. We will continue to do so.

At this dark hour in human history, with conflict raging on the European continent, we should welcome all initiatives that build understanding and tolerance. International Mother Language Day is one such initiative, and I thank our friends and partners from Bangladesh and UNESCO for it.

3.55 pm

Apsana Begum: I thank everyone who has contributed today to what has been a very positive debate. It is clear that valuing linguistic diversity helps people with their understanding of language and culture, raises educational attainment—as the Minister has mentioned—and celebrates the plurality and richness of our multicultural communities. It is important for us all to continue to stand with and celebrate all of our communities: diverse, dynamic, multicultural and multiracial, with people of all different faiths and none from everywhere around the world, including Ukraine.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered International Mother Language Day 2022.

3.56 pm

Sitting suspended.

Household Support Fund

4 pm

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the household support fund.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, and a pleasure to speak about what is one of the Government's better-kept secrets: the household support fund. I thank the Minister for his time today—I am sure that he has better things to do than listen to me. I also thank the Trussell Trust and StepChange for their assistance in advance of the debate.

In US presidential elections, there is a phenomenon called the October surprise, when something occurs that transforms the election in an unprecedented way. Well, we had our own October surprise last year, when the Chancellor announced a £500 million household support fund, to be spent between 6 October last year and the end of March this year. However, it seems to be the Government support package that dare not speak its name, so rarely do I see it referred to in the media. Voluntary sector organisations in Blackpool have simply not heard of it, despite it offering some £1.7 million to households in need across the town, which has some of the most deprived communities in the country. I therefore very much want to talk about it. That is not because I am going to demand that the Chancellor spend £500 million every year—year in, year out—but because I want the Department for Work and Pensions to learn from the experience of the fund, and the previous temporary covid grant schemes, to better target existing crisis funding.

The Government have invested nearly £1 billion in this type of support in the last two years. It is now time to enable local authorities to plan for the long term and put in place strategies that can implement best practice around co-ordination. Specifically, the Government should review the Welfare Reform Act 2012, which localised significant welfare powers, including the delivery of council tax reduction schemes, discretionary housing payments and so on. A review one decade on, alongside a consideration of interventions during the pandemic, would allow for a proper consideration of how best to deliver crisis support in the future. We have to take the lessons from the household support fund and apply them to existing Government schemes, so that they work better, avoid duplication and empower local government to be a more effective delivery vehicle. Central Government will always pick up the tab if a local government response does not meet need.

However, although crisis support is delivered locally, too often it is not part of the local authority's wider support network, which can boost incomes and prevent crises from happening in the first place. For example, someone who needs support with their housing might not be referred further to the local welfare assistance scheme in their area, as it might be located in a different department in the council. The provision of cash crisis support not only benefits the recipient but helps to prevent higher-cost interventions further down the line. Milton Keynes Council used a New Economy unit cost database to estimate the cost savings to other public services from its own local welfare scheme. It estimated that, over a full year, awards made by the authority

worth £500,000 led to a total estimated combined saving for central Government and local government of almost £10 million.

We know that in the weeks and months to come we will see people struggle with energy costs, increasing inflation in food basics in the supermarkets—as the campaigner Jack Monroe has discovered—and other higher costs across the entire household budget. The need for this type of support is not going to dissipate. We have to maximise the effectiveness of what the Government already spend. The Government have a duty to focus on preventing destitution in the coming months. Many people have had an adverse life experience in the previous 12 months, such as becoming homeless, becoming sick or disabled, or facing a bereavement. Those experiences interact with the existence and persistence of poverty in our communities, and can tip people further into destitution. In those situations, locally run services have a vital role to play, from providing support with rental arrears to delivering cash-first support to people who are facing immediate financial shortfall.

We know that local policy interventions can make an important difference, preventing a short-term shock from turning into a long-term problem. However, local support is often not joined up effectively, with a lack of targeting and communication, and poor links between statutory and voluntary sector services. For example, someone who needs support with their housing might not be referred further. In some areas, local welfare assistance will not even exist.

Indeed, there is evidence that third sector delivery can be more effective than that provided by councils. The North East Child Poverty Commission's recent report on local welfare assistance schemes highlighted Darlington Borough Council, and said

"it is felt the delivery of the service by Citizens Advice has been 'much more effective in identifying and addressing the underlying reasons for people's financial crises'"

than the council support.

Time and again, when I speak to third sector providers of emergency support, I hear how the slowness of the local government response through existing funds means that the charity uses its own funds to meet crisis needs, because the recipients simply cannot wait, when the state is already providing local government with the money to do just that. This seems wholly counter-productive to me.

The housing support fund has been a chance to fix this disjointed approach, but it is critical that the evaluation of how to reform both this scheme and existing schemes begins now. There was meant to have been a review of two previous covid grant schemes, announced back in February 2021, when I first introduced a ten-minute rule Bill to reform the local welfare assistance scheme. Can the Minister update me on the progress of that review? Is it complete? When will it be published?

The household support fund and local welfare assistance schemes are the safety net that exists beneath the safety net, but there have long been concerns about both the adequacy and, more importantly, the efficiency and coverage of local welfare assistance schemes. The household support fund is a chance to correct that.

One might think it too soon to publish a review on the household support fund when money will still be being disbursed in voucher form well into April. Yet we

[Paul Maynard]

also know that an interim management information return was required by 21 January 2022 for spend between 6 October 2021 and 31 December 2021. This was presumably to make an assessment of progress so far, so I hope the Minister might be able to say a little more than some might anticipate by telling everybody how the fund has performed so far; otherwise, why collect the information?

I have some specific queries about how the Department for Work and Pensions intends to learn from this fund. What metrics will the household support fund be evaluated against? What would success for the fund look like? When it was announced, the fund pledged that

“everyone should be able to afford the essentials.”

Does the Minister agree that this is still the purpose of the fund? If so, how will he assess whether it has met this objective, which was set by the Chancellor? Indeed, how would he define “essentials”? It is a nebulous term. Do the Government intend to map how the household support fund has been delivered by each local authority and make that information publicly available?

One significant problem, pre pandemic, was the unwillingness of some councils to even operate a local welfare assistance scheme. The Government provided some £167 million to local authorities for these schemes. I know that was not ringfenced, but it was provided as a visible funding line. However, recent research by Liverpool-based charity End Furniture Poverty found that increasing numbers of upper-tier local authorities no longer run local welfare assistance schemes. This has got worse during the pandemic and there are now 32 such authorities, up from 23 in 2019, including authorities the size of Hampshire, Nottinghamshire, Nottingham, Stoke, Staffordshire and Wolverhampton. Many other councils spend less than 10% of what was allocated to them, and few operate the full wraparound service that represents best practice.

Research by End Furniture Poverty shows the situation has become worse during covid, despite funding for local welfare doubling, with money diverted to increasing free school meal provision, for example, despite a separate Government revenue stream precisely to fund that. Can the Minister answer these questions? Based on the interim management information I know he has available, how many local authorities have used the household support fund to improve and cross-subsidise their own local welfare assistance schemes?

In extreme cases, local authorities with limited capacity to deliver and spend this funding instead provided blanket grants to voluntary sector organisations, including food banks. The Trussell Trust itself thinks it is questionable whether this is an effective or intended use of Government funding, and that that risks entrenching emergency food aid as part of the local welfare system. What assessment has the Minister made of how much funding the voluntary and community sector has received through the household support fund?

The guidance for the fund lists a range of groups beyond just food banks, including GPs and schools. Will the Minister commit to publishing data on which third-sector groups the money has gone to, segmenting it by category, so that we can better understand best practice and different delivery models? Does he believe

that local authority funding of food banks is an effective use of public funds? On what basis is that assessment being made? Do returns show that more or less was spent in the period to December? What impact will that have on the guidance that all moneys must be spent by the end of March? More fundamentally, given all the data now available, will the Government commit, as per my previous ten-minute rule Bill, to a review of all local support, including the household support fund, local welfare assistance schemes, discretionary housing payments and council tax support?

The North East Child Poverty Commission’s report, which I referred to earlier, details the tangled web of potential support across the north-east that many people would argue needs rationalising. I quote from the report as an example, not because I know the north-east particularly well. The commission writes:

“accessing the Gregg’s Foundation Hardship Fund; utilising stocks of second-hand furniture and white goods stored by some councils; providing support via Section 17 of the Children’s Act 1989; the use of Discretionary Housing Payments, Council Tax Support and Section 13a discretionary Council Tax reductions; accessing assistance from social housing providers; using ward member budgets; referring into Warm Homes teams; in the case of one authority, using a pot of funding bequeathed to them by a resident for local people facing financial hardship.”

So many pots, and so little co-ordination. I could easily add universal credit crisis loans, given how many are effectively written off; the availability of upcycling in the community these days; the British Heart Foundation furniture charity shops that I see across the north-west; domestic violence charities using public grants to provide emergency packages; council-funded food banks; and individual schools in my constituency topping up pupils’ prepayment meters. The list of publicly funded sources of short-term financial help is endless, but they can actually start to cancel each other out. All this public funding needs bringing together under one branded title that people know exists, with minimum standards of provision set out in statutory guidance. There should not be a differently named project in each council, with different criteria, different application processes and different types of assistance.

I should explain some salient background points to the Minister, whose predecessor, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), bore the brunt of my obsession with this topic. Low-income families have an average of only £95 in savings, and some 40% of those aged 20 to 29 have no savings at all. These sorts of situations reinforce what is called the poverty premium—a term that I heartily dislike—which is increasingly prevalent. For example, if someone has no cooker, it may mean that they spend more on costly takeaway meals, if they are time-poor. Having no washing machine might mean someone paying £4 down the launderette, and £3 for the dryer, rather than 25p for the average home wash. Local welfare assistance schemes offer timely support, but there should be a wider challenge to policy makers to find ways to incentivise small or even tiny amounts of savings, to improve financial resilience over time.

From professional bodies such as Perennial, which cares for those in the horticulture sector, to religious groups such as St Vincent de Paul or Quaker Social Action, there are myriad charitable providers out there. The Association of Charitable Organisations counts some 800 providing practical support alone. The overlapping tapestry of voluntary support is a credit to our nation’s

sense of collective endeavour, but together these organisations can achieve so much more as part of a wrap-around, best practice model that reduces longer-term costs for councils and social housing providers. In discussions with them, however, I hear time and again that they do not know about local government schemes, or that they are too time-consuming or difficult to access. Speed matters, so they deploy their own funds, which might otherwise go on things that the Government already make provision for, but that councils do not always use for that purpose.

There are exceptional private sector providers out there that connect individuals in need of help with funding bodies. Charis Grants and Family Fund Business Services are just two examples of organisations that provide platforms through which public bodies can access goods and supply them to those in need. Pin4 Cash and Cash Perks can immediately deliver a “cash first” solution straight to those needing help. Why are these providers not playing a more salient role in how the Government seek to deliver help to the frontline? They offer greater efficiency and the help can be more precisely targeted.

We also welcome Toynbee Hall and Fair4All Finance’s piloting of no interest loans. That is modelled on what Good Shepherd does in Australia, and the pilot was commissioned by the Treasury, which I welcome. I recognise that this needs doing right. Will the Minister assure me that he will personally take an interest these schemes, which should reduce long-term demand for local welfare assistance schemes by creating financial resilience, and which will enable people to access some white goods without being pushed into a poor financial situation?

All of that would mean that what the Government spend would go that much further, and then we would not have the usual debate in this place in which Members, particularly Labour MPs, demand ever larger amounts of new money. How we spend matters as much as how much we spend. The household support fund has been the largest exercise in delivering emergency financial support since world war two. If we do not use this opportunity to ask key questions and reimagine how we provide this support, we are missing a crucial opportunity to bring the financially vulnerable back from the brink of destitution.

4.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (David Rutley): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) on securing this debate on the household support fund. He is a thoughtful and dedicated constituency MP who has a lot of experience in this area. I take his comments and observations very seriously. I will try to answer some of his points—he has made quite a few, but that is good.

As Members will be aware, we introduced a £500 million support fund last October to help vulnerable households with essentials, running until 31 March this year. That was in recognition of the fact that some people required extra support over the year as we entered the final stages of the recovery from the pandemic. The household support fund has provided £421 million of support to

local authorities to help vulnerable people in England with the cost of food, utilities and wider essentials. The Barnett formula has been applied in the usual way, meaning that the devolved Administrations also received almost £80 million.

The household support fund helps vulnerable households with food, energy and water costs, and many local authorities have used the funding to support vulnerable households with children by providing free school meal vouchers during the holidays. The support also covers any form of fuel that is used for domestic heating, cooking or lighting, as well as water for drinking, washing, cooking, or sewage and sanitary purposes. The household support fund can be used to support wider essential needs that are not linked to energy and water, and those may include, but are not limited to, support with other bills, including broadband, phone bills, clothing and essential transport-related costs.

In response to one of the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys, there is no prescriptive definition of essentials, although our guidance for the household support fund outlined how we felt the funding ought to be targeted. Authorities have discretion—that is an important word—to assess what is reasonable when it comes to assisting those in genuine need this winter. Local authorities also have discretion on exactly how this funding is used in their area. They can take a variety of routes: they can offer vouchers to households, directly provide food or other goods, or issue grants to third parties, who then distribute goods to vulnerable households on their behalf.

Local authorities set their own eligibility requirements, and they have been encouraged to use a wide range of data and sources of information at their disposal to identify and provide support to a broad cross-section of vulnerable households in their area. Assistance from the household support fund is not restricted to households in receipt of benefits. At least 50% of the funding is dedicated to vulnerable households with children, while up to 50% is available to vulnerable households without children, including individuals.

As my hon. Friend has set out, the household support fund is a form of local welfare assistance. Local welfare assistance is a local authority-delivered discretionary safety net beyond the national benefit system that can provide one-off or infrequent assistance for people in need. Funding for local welfare assistance is included in the local government finance settlement. This Government remain committed to supporting people on low incomes, and the household support fund is just one element of a wider package of support. We established several local welfare schemes during the pandemic, including the covid winter grant scheme, which ran from December 2020 to April 2021, and the covid local support grant, which ran from April 2021 to September 2021. The household support fund built on this support, and it means that we have provided nearly £1 billion in local welfare support since December 2020.

Those schemes offered quick, targeted support for families when they needed it most. Local authorities in England made six million awards through the covid winter grant scheme and a further 4.3 million through the covid local support grant. We will be internally reviewing the delivery of those schemes to learn lessons and inform policy making moving forward.

[David Rutley]

In order to support local authorities in implementing the covid winter support scheme, covid local support grant and household support fund by identifying those most in need, my Department has shared data on universal credit claimants on low incomes who are eligible for free school meals or free prescriptions, whether those are households with or without children. The data is shared with authorities through local welfare provision regulations. There are many examples of good practice delivery of the household support fund.

Blackpool, which includes the constituency of my hon. Friend, has done some good work in this space. Happily, it is a place I am familiar with, having recently attended a jobs fair at Blackpool Tower for the Kickstart scheme. I think that was back in September. Time flies. Blackpool has been allocated £1.7 million from the household support fund, which is being used to provide short-term financial support to vulnerable households in the area.

Indeed, Blackpool is demonstrating the value and the flexibility of the household support fund by prioritising costs relating to energy, water bills and items relating to keeping warm, including winter clothing, blankets, draught excluders and window sealants. The scheme is also providing funding for boiler repair services. That demonstrates just how responsive and diverse the support under this scheme can be. Another example of good practice can be found in Leicester. It is responding to an increase in the wholesale price of gas by issuing an energy grant of, on average, £340 per eligible household through the fund. It has been providing travelling communities with grants to refill bottle gas, and around 300 foster family households are receiving one-off grants of £500 towards the increased cost of utilities and fuel.

Likewise, Lambeth has made good use of the fund. It provided additional support to community organisations that provide food boxes to harder-to-reach communities; the food is tailored to reflect the diverse cultural make-up of those areas. It also encouraged residents to apply for further support by promoting the fund through the borough's health and wellbeing bus, which visits high footfall areas and provides covid vaccinations and other health and wellbeing offers. It is a very creative approach, which is to be commended.

My hon. Friend highlighted the important role of third-party providers in delivering support locally. Local authorities have worked closely with third parties on delivery of the household support fund, and they have been an important part of how the scheme has been delivered in some areas.

Darlington Borough Council, which I think my hon. Friend mentioned, has a mature relationship with the charity Bread and Butter Thing. The charity's core mission is to make affordable food available to struggling families. It already works with local community organisations in a well-established network, making it an ideal partner for the borough council to approach for help with distributing the household support fund. A partnership was agreed, whereby it would administer fuel voucher applications and provide free bags of shopping for those in greatest need, in addition to running weekly mobile food clubs.

The household support fund ends on 31 March, but other support for those on low incomes will continue to be available after this point. We understand that people

are concerned about pressure on household budgets, and we are taking action to help. The household support fund is just one part of a £12 billion fund that the Government are spending this year and next on providing wider support, in order to ease cost of living pressures. Help is targeted at working families, low-income households and those in the most need and with vulnerable families.

We are cutting the universal credit taper rate to make sure that work pays, and are uplifting the work allowance, which will put an extra £1,000 a year into the pockets of two million low-income families. We are also freezing fuel and alcohol duties to keep costs down, and are increasing the national living wage to £9.50 per hour in April, providing an extra £1,000 in pay for a full-time worker. It has risen every year since it was introduced in 2016.

In addition, in response to the concern about increasing energy prices, the Government recently announced a three-part plan of support to help households with rising energy bills. That support is worth £9.1 billion in 2022-23. That includes a £200 discount on energy bills this autumn for domestic electricity customers in Great Britain, which will be paid back automatically over the next five years. There is also a £150 non-repayable rebate on council tax bills for households in bands A to D in England, as well as a £144 million discretionary fund for local authorities, so that they can support households that need assistance but are not eligible for the rebate.

There is also existing support to help people with the cost of fuel or energy, for example through the warm home discount and the winter fuel payment. That will help households with rising energy costs. Cold weather payments provide £25 a week extra for poorer households when temperatures are consistently below zero. We have increased the value of healthy start vouchers to £4.25, and we are also investing more than £200 million a year, from 2022, in continuing our holiday activities food programme. That is already providing enriching activities and healthy meals to children in English local authorities.

My hon. Friend mentioned local authority funding for food banks. He is well aware that they are independent and charitable organisations, and the Department for Work and Pensions does not have a role in their operation. There is no consistent and accurate measure of food bank usage at a constituency or national level. We understand the data limitations in that area, so in April 2021, we introduced a set of questions into the family resources survey to measure and track food bank usage. The first results of those questions, which will be subject to the usual quality assurance processes, are due to be published in March 2023. I am sure that the data will be of great interest to him, as it will be to me and Ministers in the Department.

To conclude, the household support fund is one of a number of ways the Government have supported those who need help most across the country. The household support fund has provided local authorities with the flexibility to tailor their provision to individual needs, and it allows them to target a broader cohort of households. We are unfortunately not yet able to discuss the interim management information collected from the household support fund so far. The information gathered from the scheme will be published once the scheme has closed and the data has been properly analysed and checked by our officials. That management information on the

household support fund will provide helpful further details on how local authorities have been using this important funding. The covid winter grant scheme management information was published in June 2021, and the covid local support grant management information was published in September 2021.¹

That information will inform future policy decisions in this area, as we look to learn lessons from the support we provided throughout the pandemic and beyond. I am sure that that information will be of interest to my hon. Friend, who has once again this afternoon demonstrated his expertise in this area of policy, and his commitment to improving the life chances of vulnerable people, not just in Blackpool but across the country. I am grateful for his interest and expertise.

Question put and agreed to.

Shared Prosperity Fund: Devolved Administrations

4.30 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the shared prosperity fund and the devolved Administrations.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward.

I am grateful for the opportunity to raise an issue and hopefully to get some clarity on a matter of concern and potential opportunity for a number of third sector partners and others in Northern Ireland. It has been almost five years since the shared prosperity fund was first floated as the replacement for the loss of EU structural funds after Brexit. The SPF was included in the Conservative manifesto, which claimed that the focus would be on reducing inequalities between communities and that the Government would consult widely on the design of the fund. The manifesto explicitly outlined the involvement of the devolved Administrations, although stakeholder engagement events a few years ago were characterised to me by polite generalities and weak assurances, and unfortunately the Government do not appear to have met those commitments, either about the breadth and the scope of the scheme or about the engagement with partners.

From what information we have, we know that funding will come directly from Westminster, without the involvement of local authorities or devolved Parliaments. In Northern Ireland, some of the bodies that have been administering European funds for the last several decades and that have experience and trusted links are apparently being retired at this point, amid a centralisation of power. The phrase “Take back control” resonated with many people, but with some of the funds that have traditionally underpinned social progress and economic progress in Northern Ireland, it appears to mean taking back control and handing it directly to London.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way and I congratulate her on securing the debate on a very important issue—perhaps the most important issue for the economic development of the respective countries of the UK. The hon. Lady is right that this is an unashamed power grab by the UK Government. It fatally undermines the ability of the Welsh Government, the Northern Ireland Government and the Scottish Government to deal with their role in economic development. A key part of the role, of course, is strategic regional planning. The constitutional issue is very important, but so is delivery. The way that the UK Government go about the process will fundamentally undermine strategic regional economic planning in our respective countries.

Claire Hanna: I agree. As I say, there are opportunities and willing partners, but unfortunately it appears that the funding is being delivered over the heads of those who have an interest in and a proven track record on a number of the issues.

The latest information we have is that the fund is set to operate from April 2022, which is next month, replacing funds such as the European social fund and regional development funds that have provided vital opportunity for infrastructure and specifically to support some of

1. [Official Report, 8 March 2022, Vol. 710, c. 4MC.]

[*Claire Hanna*]

the most marginalised and vulnerable individuals in our region and across the devolved areas. At the moment, however, the information people are seeking on the design, the priorities, the level of funding available and the governance arrangements simply is not there.

That confusion has left substantial holes in a number of Stormont Departments and left many key third sector partners in the lurch. Northern Ireland's Department for the Economy has warned that the £100 million gap that it faces in this funding period will mean halving its apprenticeship programmes and a rollback of the skills agenda, which has been a key focus of our party and of many others.

It also means missing a potential opportunity. As Members from all parties will know, we face an almost unprecedented demand for labour. There are opportunities in that regard, but some of the funds were specifically designed to work with individuals and get them over the barriers that they personally faced to take up and retain work.

There are organisations such as Orchardville, a social enterprise and charity in my own constituency, which for four decades has worked with people with autism and learning disabilities, helping them to learn and to earn, and to have the dignity and support of a work environment. At this moment, however, Orchardville faces a substantial black hole.

It is worth saying that the concerns are held not just by those organisations that sought to receive these funds, or by political parties such as my own. Invest NI has been very clear that it believes that the funding would be best delivered in conjunction with the Northern Ireland programme for government and through existing delivery partners. The think-tank Pivotal and a number of other respected commentators and business voices have been raising that point over the past month or two, and the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs has conducted a wide-ranging inquiry into investment priorities in Northern Ireland. Although people see opportunities, concern has been expressed by many of those people about the loss of experience and fidelity that changes to delivery will bring.

Northern Ireland, like other devolved regions, was a net beneficiary in Europe—that is not a secret. I do not think it is anything to be ashamed about either, because the funding allocations were made on the basis of need, and in many cases they were a counterweight to the obvious challenges that Northern Ireland faced in those years, but also to decades of under-investment in areas such as skills and infrastructure. We have had the lowest UK rate of capital investment over many decades and, of course, a stark failure to attract quality foreign direct investment. The founder of our party, John Hume, said many times that the best peace process is a job: the best way to enable people to build and have hope in their futures and, I suppose, to get around the things that have divided them is for them to have meaningful employment—a reason to stay, a reason to get up in the morning and a reason to build.

It is worth also saying that we unashamedly saw an opportunity for Northern Ireland in that political example of common endeavour, with people pooling their needs and abilities in a spirit of co-operation and interdependence, without those people having to change their identity in

any way. The French are still French in Europe, and the Germans are still German in Europe. British people in Northern Ireland and Irish people in Northern Ireland could still have an opportunity to co-operate, and the European funds facilitated that over many years. Individuals and the capacity they built, as well as regions and specific industries, are almost unrecognisable after the funding they received.

“Have faith and try new things” is the message we have heard so far from the UK Government, but unfortunately, the experiences people have had so far with the community renewal fund—billed by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up as the forerunner to the SPF—have exacerbated fears. Bids for that fund were invited by the UK Government from a range of local applicants including, but not limited to, universities, voluntary and community sector organisations and umbrella business groups. They were received from a variety of partners, such as Women's Aid, Mencap, and the Royal National Institute of Blind People. Applications were rejected from groups including Catalyst, which is a well-respected entrepreneurial hub, and Northern Ireland Screen, which is trying to capitalise on the burgeoning film and television sector in Northern Ireland and is creating the kind of exciting jobs that young people in Northern Ireland have never had the opportunity to have—the kind of jobs that allow people to stay and to build a career and a life.

Who was the biggest recipient? It was not any of those groups: it was TieTa, an Oxford-based call centre with no ground game and no operational experience in Northern Ireland, a group that started its life as the customer service arm of a payday lending company. Its funding allocation through the predecessor fund was over twice that of the next biggest recipient, which was Ulster University. Looking at Companies House, three directors of that company are listed: are they from Maghera or the Mournes, or are they from Millisle? No, they are from Monaco; that is the experience that people are having. The fears that many of us have articulated for many years about the loss of EU funds have not been allayed in any way by the rolling out of that fund.

We are in a new paradigm. We are where we are, and our approach has always been to try to make lemonade out of the lemons we have been handed. We want the opportunity to build in Northern Ireland, we want to create real careers and real opportunities for young people, and we want to capitalise on Northern Ireland's unique dual market access—the first real unique selling point that we have had in many decades of sluggishness and low productivity—but to do that we need local power in local hands. That was a key part of the 1998 agreement. Brexit has not just been a threat in terms of border and identities; that concept of local powers, local decision making and building up trust between local decision makers in mutual endeavour has been crucial to the last 20 years.

The fund should have been an opportunity to realise some of those ambitions. It should have been a way to connect regions—to “level up”, in the common vernacular—and remove barriers to employment. So far, the experience is not good. People need information, and they need some experience that is not handing cash to people registered in Monaco and Oxfordshire.

4.40 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is not often that I am called first to speak. Indeed, I am always shocked that it should happen—and very pleased, too; thank you so much, Sir Edward.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) on her excellent representations for the project that we all wish to see more of—the shared prosperity fund. As she said, we want to see more funds filtering down to our constituencies. She referred to three or four things, including the TieTa group and its three owners from Monaco. I just said to my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart), “Who wants to live in Monaco when you can live in Millisle?” That is because Millisle is in my constituency, of course—at least, part of it is.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): Just for the record, Millisle is in my constituency.

Jim Shannon: No, for the record, the Drumfad Road—the Drumfad estate right up to the car park—is in mine. I know it is, because I knock those doors.

I am very pleased to support the hon. Member for Belfast South in bringing the debate forward. There is absolutely no doubt that the shared prosperity fund is needed to build on work that has been done in every region of the United Kingdom through EU funding. Not to be too pedantic, but it is always great to get a percentage of the money that we funnelled into the EU back into our communities. I am very pleased that we have been able to do that.

I share a semblance of the dismay outlined by the hon. Lady, my Northern Ireland colleague—we are from different parties but very much on the same page on this issue—yet I am perhaps a wee bit more optimistic. I suppose I tend to be more optimistic about life—the glass is always half-full rather than half-empty—because there are good things happening. To be fair to the hon. Lady, she outlined the issues but also where we can go with this, and I want to do the same.

When the new Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns)—it is lovely to see him in his place—was appointed, I quickly asked him to come down to the most beautiful constituency in the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Strangford. I say to the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) that that is not in dispute. I was very pleased to bring the Minister down to Strangford. I know that he has a deep interest in Northern Ireland—it has always been in his blood and in his life—so it was good to get him down to Strangford to introduce him to some of the issues on which the shared prosperity fund could make the difference.

I wanted speak to those issues and to give the Minister a taste of the concerns. I spoke to him beforehand and said, “Here are my thoughts; are those things that you would like to do?” and he very quickly said that he would. Issues such as the local high street and how it should feature, and our education system, are key for every one of us. We had a chance to go to Castle Gardens School, and we went to the high street and met the chamber of trade in Newtownards town. There is also our tourism industry; we went to Mount Stewart, and we had a lovely lunch in Harrisons in the constituency. That is one of the tourism projects that has taken off.

In two major areas in which the EU has had control over subsidies in the past, we spoke to the fishermen and, importantly, to the community representatives. The Minister asked for that specifically, and I was very pleased to make that happen. Those are the sorts of things—the changes in the community—that we want. I think I referred to them as the journeys that people have taken away from the past to a new future. Those are the sorts of things that I wish to speak about.

The Minister acknowledged the awful handling of the situation so far for the fishermen. I know that the fishermen in Portavogie were particularly enthralled with the Minister. Sir Edward, if you ever want somebody to imitate our Prime Minister, he is the man who can do it—nobody can do it better. For one minute, if I closed my eyes, I thought it was the Prime Minister. The Minister issued a promise to get it right with his colleagues; he did that for us, and we appreciate that. I got him to meet with the local community representatives from one of the estates in my area, a very progressive community group that is probably one of the best in the Ards area. I did so with a clear view of showing him how far so many have come in our town, and the giant leap forward there has been in the work that they carry out. It is work that it is essential to continue. That is why the shared prosperity fund is so important; it makes a difference and builds a future that we can all wrap our arms around and be part of.

I felt that the Minister took seriously the five areas that I had highlighted. The group he wanted to meet again was the community group, and in particular, its young people. I could see that the Minister was interested. He, like myself and the community group, could see where the future needs to be built. The shared prosperity fund is one way of doing that. We heard how the community wanted to move away from the actions and the reactions of the past. They want to train the new generations in a new way of doing and looking at things. They want to train the new generation to look at things in a way that, some time ago, the community did not, and, if I am perfectly honest, in a way that I did not 40 years ago either. The Minister saw the value of facilitating the local community network through European funding and his response was clear: the work must continue. I subscribe to that. That is what the hon. Member for Belfast South wants. I believe it will continue, but we need a wee bit of help.

We look to the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien). I know I have been referring to the Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office—he will forgive me for that, but I wanted to tell the story because it is part of where we are. I look to the Minister for a positive response. That cannot happen without dedicated funding. I have highlighted the areas in my constituency that need help from the fund, including the small businesses that we met on that day; people working in fishing and agriculture, which are still major employers; tourism, which Ards and North Down Council believes is key to building the economy; and our community and educators. Funding for innovation is also essential for large business expansion.

All of that is necessary for a flourishing Northern Ireland—a Northern Ireland for everyone. That is what I want to see, it is what the hon. Member for Belfast South wants to see, and it is what the Minister wants to see. I am sure that everyone else here wants to see the

[*Jim Shannon*]

same thing. There is work to be done, and more to do. We have moved forward with a contribution from both sides of the community working together. There is an appetite to do it; there is an appetite from elected representatives, from the Minister and from others here today.

I encourage the Minister to announce the parameters of the fund, to allow every area—not just my constituency, but Belfast South and every constituency in Northern Ireland—the support. We need to help Northern Ireland, and indeed the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland as whole, to live up to our potential. I believe that Northern Ireland has that potential, we just need help through the shared prosperity fund to do that. There is no pressure on the Minister, whatsoever, but will he tell us what he will do for us? We want to take that journey together—all parties and all representatives, along with our Minister and our Government.

4.48 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I will begin by thanking the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) for securing this debate and for the welcome opportunity to discuss the shared prosperity fund's governance and scale, as well as the promises that were made to the devolved nations. Levelling up is an economic necessity, and for decades Plaid Cymru has drawn attention to the chasms that separate our nations in economic development, social opportunity and political attention. That is why, although I applauded the long-term vision contained in the levelling-up White Paper, I am concerned that it lacks the requisite funding and structural reform necessary to realise that vision. Quite simply, we need to get the shared prosperity fund right—a task that has been made even more difficult by a less than auspicious start. The Government dragged their heels in publicising the detail and in implementing the fund itself, and we now know that it also represents a broken manifesto promise, at least as it relates to Wales. On page 15 of the Welsh Conservative manifesto, the party committed

“to ensure that no part of the UK loses out from the withdrawal of EU funding”.

The Welsh Government have recently calculated that the Welsh budget will instead be £1 billion worse off by the year 2024 than if we had continued to receive EU funding through the structural funds. If we look to the EU and its €750 billion covid recovery fund, or to Germany's historic €2 trillion, or £71 billion annual, investment in east Germany, we have an idea of the scale of the funding that levelling up truly requires.

I urge the Government, in the light of some of those examples, to raise their ambitions when it comes to levelling up—to levelling up levelling up, even—and to perhaps look at committing 1% of GDP over the coming decade, equivalent to some £22 billion annually, to the shared prosperity fund and the task of levelling up the nations and regions of the United Kingdom.

Sadly, in terms of governance, the UK Government are already repeating past mistakes by adopting the same centralised Whitehall model that created many of the regional inequalities in the first place. The shared prosperity fund must be administered by each nation, rather than being disbursed in a fashion that turns

nations and regions against each other. Not only is that inefficient but it undermines devolved responsibilities for economic development, a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards).

The shared prosperity fund must be better resourced and must work with rather than over the devolved nations. Anything else would be further proof that Westminster does not work for Wales. It would also call into question whether it works for the persistence of this Union.

4.52 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) on securing this debate. I declare my membership of the all-party parliamentary group on the shared prosperity fund.

Since we heard about the shared prosperity fund way back in 2017, the whole thing has been shrouded in confusion. The Government have been less than forthcoming with clarity and detail. While we now have some more information about the fund, there is still too much uncertainty.

Then there is the top-down, Whitehall-led approach that the Government have insisted on using. Welsh local authorities such as my own in Merthyr Tydfil and Caerphilly County Borough Council, which covers the Upper Rhymney valley part of my constituency, have 20 years' experience of working together through the Welsh Local Government Association and alongside the Welsh Government to deliver strategic regeneration projects. It is deeply concerning that, instead of a strategic joined-up approach to investment to tackle the urgent issues affecting our communities, we now seem to see a centralised Whitehall-led approach administered by Departments with no real understanding of the needs of Welsh communities. They have limited experience of working with communities in Wales and little understanding of the priorities of those communities. There is also the complete bypassing of devolution.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I also declare an interest: I chair the APPG on the shared prosperity fund. The pre-launch guidance to the fund simply says that the devolved Administrations

“will be invited to play a role in the development and delivery of local investment plans.”

Does my hon. Friend agree that that is an incredibly vague statement, which could mean absolutely nothing, and that the fund is also part of a broader project being pursued by the UK Government of dismantling the entire project of devolution?

Gerald Jones: I very much agree. We are seeing an opportunity to bypass devolution, which is a very real threat to what has been built up over the last 20 years. This is not the partnership approach we all could have supported; I fear that it is a real step backwards.

I am deeply concerned, as I know others are, that Wales and areas across the UK are going to lose out as a result of the withdrawal of EU funds, despite the promise that we would not lose a penny. The Chancellor's Budget for next year shows some £400 million across

the UK as opposed to the £1.5 billion that was earlier mentioned. For the purposes of comparison, Wales alone used to receive £375 million. Next year, for the whole of the UK the figure will be barely that.

The lack of clarity from the Government on the amount of funding, how it will be used and the involvement of devolved Administrations has been hugely disappointing from the start, and it saddens me that it shows no sign of improvement. Hopefully, the Minister will give us further clarity and address the points that have been raised for so long.

I want to give a short, quick example to the Minister. Some years ago, prior to entering this place, I was a local councillor heavily involved in regeneration in my local community. A hugely significant regeneration project had £6 million of EU funding allocated to it, but that was just a catalyst. That funding also unlocked funding through the Welsh Government, the private sector, the lottery and other charitable partners, and not least the local community, meaning a significant investment of around £26 million all told. Those projects are still going strong almost 20 years later and are going from strength to strength. I use that example as an illustration because of the nature of the partnership between agencies, not least local government and the Welsh Government. We should learn from such examples.

Finally, what measures is the Minister taking to ensure that we can move forward in a spirit of collaboration involving all partners? As I said previously, any investment is welcome, but it should be in partnership with regional and local government and the Welsh Government, who have had significant experience in these areas. Speaking as somebody who was very much pro-Union, we achieve much more when we work together in partnership for the good of all.

4.56 pm

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) for securing this important debate today.

My comments largely reflect Northern Ireland, but there will be a large degree of commonality between the situations in Scotland and Wales. I speak as a former Minister for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland with overall responsibility for the administration of the European social fund. I also have direct knowledge of the application of the European regional development fund as well, so I can testify to the huge value that both of those played in Northern Ireland.

To follow up what the hon. Member for Belfast South indicated, we were told that Brexit was all about taking back control. Well, may I say that when we were members of the European Union, Northern Ireland Departments had more control over that money than we will have in the context of the shared prosperity fund. That is a rather ironic situation, to say the least.

I have numerous concerns to highlight. The first involves governance. To reiterate the point, this cuts across the devolved settlements in all three nations and regions of the UK. In the case of Northern Ireland, it cuts across the Good Friday agreement itself, and that is a fairly serious thing to do. It also creates a real mess in terms of governance itself. In essence, we end up with the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive

both as players essentially on the same pitch trying to do things in the same areas, whether it is around skills, apprenticeships, labour market inclusion, economic development or economic regeneration. Rather than that being greater than the sum of the parts, I fear this will become lesser than the sum of the parts because there will be built-in inefficiency in terms of what happens.

With all the best intentions in the world around co-ordination and communication, it has been far from perfect up until now. Even if that is remedied, nothing will replace the same teams in the Northern Ireland Departments having overall control over the resources and applying them in the most efficient way. That then begs the question as to what happens in terms of things like the programme for government and measurements of impact. I am not sure whether those have been highlighted by the Department at all.

We are hopeful in Northern Ireland of having an outcomes-based programme for government if and when devolution returns after the Assembly election. In that context, it is important that whatever happens, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities works hand in hand to the same objectives. If not, again we are going to miss the opportunity to make the best use of the resources.

The same point applies to measurement. How on earth will the Department measure the impact of its interventions on, for example, skill levels, if it is only one part of a wider equation in which Northern Ireland Departments, notably the Department for the Economy and the further education colleges and universities, are all trying to do the same thing? How on earth do we disaggregate all of that? There is then the issue of the scale of the spending. Like Wales, Northern Ireland was told that we would be no worse off under the shared prosperity fund than we were under the structural funds, and yet the Northern Ireland Department of Finance and the wider Executive have made it clear that Northern Ireland risks losing up to £70 million per year of spending power. I would be grateful if the Minister could reconcile those two seemingly contradictory positions.

We then come to the nature of the spending itself. There has been a long-established pattern in terms of the areas where European funding has been put to use. In terms of investment in skills, a large part of apprenticeship funding in Northern Ireland has come through the European social fund, and almost the entirety of areas such as disability employment have been funded through European funding. The ERDF supported a wide range of economic development measures and regeneration issues. Indeed, Invest Northern Ireland, our main inward investment organisation, has depended on that type of funding, and its budget faces a very uncertain future.

Even if those issues are clarified, there are issues around the switchover between the next—and final—round of ESF and the start of the shared prosperity fund. There are a lot of groups working on the margins that are deeply concerned in that regard. There are fears of gaps in the provision of programmes, and of some programmes ceasing altogether. There are concerns about those who are employed. Unlike the civil service, the community and voluntary sector has to put people on notice of redundancy whenever funding comes to an end. There are a lot of people out there who are very worried about their own futures.

[Stephen Farry]

Finally, I want to ask why the actions and role of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in Northern Ireland will not be covered under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. By contrast, both the Northern Ireland Office and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs are covered under section 75. The spending that will potentially come through the Department is much greater than that which comes through either of those bodies, so the situation is slightly incongruous. I would be grateful if the Minister could explain the discrepancy.

5.2 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Thank you, Sir Edward. It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on the shared prosperity fund and the devolved Governments, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) for bringing it forward and for setting out her case so comprehensively.

The Tory manifesto pledged a fair and equal share of funding that would fully replace EU support, which in Scotland would have been around £183 million per year. However, the Treasury Committee has already indicated, in a report published at the end of January, that the UK shared prosperity fund up to 2024-25 will be worth 40% less than EU support. In addition, all the power over the delivery of the funding is concentrated in Whitehall. There is no doubt that devolved Governments have been ignored. The Scottish Government as yet have no details of how much funding will be allocated to Scotland, nor has there been any consultation with Scottish Ministers, who have had no role in investment proposals or decisions in areas that are devolved to the Scottish Parliament.

The UK shared prosperity fund will replace the EU structural funds from next month, and still there has been no meaningful engagement with Scottish Ministers, or indeed those of other devolved nations. In January, the House of Lords Constitution Committee concluded that the UK Government continued to ignore devolution and the devolved Governments' calls for greater transparency on decisions being taken with regard to levelling-up funding. With the publication of the shared prosperity fund pre-launch guidance this month, the role of devolved Governments and Parliaments is still completely unclear. The UK Government have chosen to work directly with local authorities, as presented in the guidance, and there is no evidence that they respect devolution or consider the Scottish Government, for example, an equal partner. Because the UK Government have also failed to offer any indication of Scotland's shared prosperity fund allocation, or indeed how levelling up will align with the priorities of the Scottish Government, there is no overarching strategic thinking or planning in accordance with the Scottish Government's priorities.

It is simply not respectful for the UK Government to seek the Scottish Government's help in implementing projects after they have been selected by the UK Government. The Scottish Government, and all the devolved Governments, should be consulted at all stages, as was the case with EU funding. What possible objection could there be to that, unless the purpose is to undermine devolution? Although I appreciate that the Minister will tell us of the great munificence of the UK Government, it is also important to remember that in his last Budget, the

Chancellor announced several direct funding programmes in Scotland through the levelling-up funding, totalling £172 million in spending. However, the rolling out of the levelling-up fund to communities around the UK short-changed the Scottish Government of expected Barnett consequential, leaving a £400 million hole in the budget.

Delays to the delivery of post-Brexit funding—a year into Brexit—have already robbed poorer areas of £1.5 billion in funding, with the shared prosperity fund not set to deliver until April. When it is delivered, it will fall far short of previous EU funding. The reality is that Scotland will receive 3.5% of all levelling-up funding, despite having 8.2% of the UK's population. Perhaps the Minister could explain that. The reality is that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up and the Prime Minister led a Brexit campaign promising £1.5 billion a year for Scottish devolved services when the UK left the EU. Instead, all we have heard is an announcement of £172 million. To put that into context, Scotland has received 11p for every £1 promised. In effect, Scotland has been short-changed by 89% of what was promised. I know the Minister will dispute this, but there is a growing consensus that the devolved Governments have been short-changed. The Treasury Committee says so, the House of Lords Constitution Committee says so, the Scottish Government say so, and the Unionist Welsh Government say so. They all agree that this is the case.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I want to raise the issue of Interreg with my hon. Friend, because the shared prosperity fund is touted as a replacement for EU structural funds, but the levelling-up White Paper makes no mention of Interreg. Interreg was very important to organisations such as the European Marine Energy Centre in Orkney, which works in collaboration with other partners and gets a lot of funding on the back of that in order to tackle really important common challenges in meeting our targets for net zero. Is my hon. Friend aware of that, and does she agree that it is essential that the funding is replaced?

Patricia Gibson: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The fact is that a number of organisations, including the European Marine Energy Centre, are very concerned about funding going forward, given the cuts to funding that I and many other speakers in the debate have talked about today.

Scotland has been short-changed and her Parliament undermined. I know the Minister thinks Scotland should be grateful, but the post-Brexit funding bonanza has not materialised and as a result important projects across Scotland and the devolved nations have been jeopardised. Scotland is the poorer for Brexit in so many ways. I hope the Minister will at least recognise the loss of funding that Scotland and the other devolved nations have suffered as a result and all the other concerns that he has heard about today. I really hope that when he gets to his feet, he will make a genuine attempt to address those concerns.

5.8 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve once again under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, and to contribute to the debate. My sincere thanks go to the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) for securing today's very important debate.

We have heard some excellent contributions from hon. Members of different parties who represent communities across our devolved nations. The hon. Member for Belfast South spoke about local charities needing security and sustainability in order to continue with their excellent work in her community in Northern Ireland. She referred to the programme as “learn and earn”, and I certainly wish such programmes well in the future.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made a very powerful contribution and spoke eloquently about the need to have not a penny less, in order to shape a bright future for all the communities in Northern Ireland. My hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) referred to the Westminster-centric approach of levelling up and the shared prosperity fund, and to the need to work in partnership with the Government in Wales and with local government so they can shape their own destiny. The hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) correctly derided the notion of taking control. If we look at levelling up and the shared prosperity fund, the reality on the ground is anything but that of taking control.

Even though the Government have touted the shared prosperity fund as a central pillar of their levelling-up agenda, serious questions remain. The Minister will no doubt ask us to wait until the formal launch, when all questions will be answered. However, important questions need to be answered now, as eloquently argued by the hon. Member for Belfast South. Fundamentally, we cannot escape the fact that this funding is worth only 60% of the EU funds it is replacing. How do the Government reconcile cutting 40%, which is a considerable share of the fund, and claiming to level up at the same time?

The Government are trying to hide behind rhetoric that tells the public that they are investing in them and in communities that the Government have left behind for close to 12 years, when they are doing the exact opposite, on top of a clear breaking of important manifesto pledges, as stated across the Chamber today. The Government said they would match funding to devolved nations, but clearly that is not the case. The evidence is there to see. Concerns have also been raised that the chosen delivery geographies—essentially, lower tier and unitary authorities—will result in inefficient procurement and fragmented and duplicated services. Indeed, some Members have argued powerfully that, in some cases, devolved Governments have been ignored completely.

We have heard concerns from Members representing all the devolved nations here today. As the Institute of Government has stated, the shared prosperity fund

“risks damaging trust between the UK and devolved administrations and undermining the UK government’s key objective of binding the four nations of the UK closer together.”

As we have heard today, the “Westminster knows best” diktat is an affront to the very principle of devolution, while giving the Chancellor the reins to oversee funding cuts.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) eloquently and powerfully argued, this overly centralised scheme, devised by Ministers in Westminster, has not seen proper engagement with devolved nations and other stakeholders during the development of the plans for the UK shared prosperity fund. I am sure the Minister will, again, ask us all to wait for the

full prospectus to be published. Given the scant involvement of the devolved nations that has been permitted so far, and the scant detail provided so far, he can hardly be surprised that he has been asked to attend this important debate today.

Finally, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Belfast South, can the Minister discuss the funding gap between the end of the current funding and the beginning of the shared prosperity funding, which puts community projects at risk before the shared prosperity fund even pays out a penny? With European funding provision ending in some areas as early as April, there is a real funding gap and it is causing anxieties and insecurities in our communities. Can the Minister respond to that important question?

Our collective vision should be a programme that genuinely powers up people, places and nations. It should have a focus on need. It should have fairness in its DNA and put devolved nations in the driving seat, as leaders in their localities, with not a penny or a power taken away. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

5.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Neil O’Brien): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) on securing this important and timely debate. It was also good to welcome the Minister of State for the Northern Ireland Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns), who was listening to all the extremely important points being made as closely as I was.

Given the short time available, I will come directly to the important points made by hon. Members. I am not here to argue the toss with them, but to try to start to set out how we will work together to do all these things. As hon. Members know, the shared prosperity fund will provide £2.6 billion of new funding for local investment by March 2025; it is a significant scheme. It will be provided through a funding formula, rather than a competition, which is important. While there are advantages in funding competitions, because they get people sharpening their pencils, there are a lot of advantages in formula allocations, because people have the same certainty that places used to have through some of the European structural funds.

Stephen Kinnock: On the point about funding, the Minister has just mentioned the figure of £2.6 billion. Does he therefore accept that the manifesto commitment has been broken? The manifesto commitment was to match the previous funding, which would mean £1.5 billion per year over a seven-year planning cycle. The comprehensive spending review is only a three-year time horizon, so will the Minister accept that the manifesto pledge has been broken?

Neil O’Brien: I will come to quantum later in my speech, but no, we will keep our manifesto promises.

The hon. Member for Belfast South raised really important points, and I hope I can start to set Members’ minds at ease. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), whose health I would have feared for had he not been here today, was right when he said that we are all on this journey together.

[Neil O'Brien]

I agreed with the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) when he said that we must work with devolved Governments and local people, not over their heads. I also agreed with the sensible speech made by hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), who said that we must use the experience of local partners who know what is needed and how to run these kinds of schemes.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland we are very clear that we want local partners, at all levels, to be able to shape what is done to this funding and how it is allocated. In Northern Ireland, we have a unique local government landscape in our work on the UKSPF, so we proposed to deliver at a Northern Ireland-wide scale, which will enable us to have an allocation that is felt to be fair by all communities and that will make the most of all the fantastic opportunities that there are across Northern Ireland.

The development of that single Northern Ireland plan will draw on the insight and expertise of local partners, including the Northern Ireland Executive, local authorities, businesses, the community and the voluntary sector, in order to maximise all the local intelligence, insight and knowledge that they have. We have engaged with the Northern Ireland civil service, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association and Solace on UKSPF.

I have also reached out to the Northern Ireland Executive's Minister for Finance and I plan to discuss the UKSPF further with him on Thursday. I had a very useful meeting with Minister Lochhead from the Scottish Government on Friday, and I am setting up a meeting with Vaughan Gething of the Welsh Government, as well. We are keen to work with all of the devolved Administrations to shape the way this funding is used.

Deidre Brock: When the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities delivered his statement on the levelling-up White Paper, he acknowledged to me that the First Minister was advised of an innovation accelerator that was being put into Glasgow in a phone call only the night before. Can the Minister guarantee that that sort of behaviour will not continue in the future?

Neil O'Brien: I think that innovation accelerator is terribly exciting, but I can guarantee to the hon. Lady that as part of UKSPF we are engaging at all levels with devolved Governments and other local partners with important expertise. We will also be setting up an inter-ministerial group, with ministerial representation from all the devolved Governments, so that we have a regular forum on the breadth of my Department's work to discuss these matters and to ensure there is an open dialogue across the whole UK.

The UKSPF has been designed to empower local places in all four nations of the UK. My Department is engaging with local government associations—including the Local Government Association, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association and the Welsh Local Government Association—ahead of and following the publication of the pre-launch guidance.

We will continue to engage with the devolved Governments and wider partners on the design and operation of the fund so that we can get the best outcomes

across all the UK, because there are so many different priorities. The hon. Member for Strangford talked about fishing communities, and we heard from the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) about important community groups. There are many different partners that we have to engage in shaping this important programme.

We are engaging with the Northern Ireland Executive at an official level regarding the concerns they raised about programmes that are currently running under the European social fund. That dialogue will help to push on arrangements that maximise that fund delivery in Northern Ireland. However, it is worth thinking about the totality of these different funds because, as well as the shared prosperity fund, we also have the levelling-up fund and the community renewal fund, which is a one-year fund to transition us on to the UKSPF.

For Northern Ireland alone, if we look at some of those different sources of funding, my Department has provided £49 million via the levelling-up fund, £12 million as part of the community renewal fund, and funding through the community ownership fund, which enables different community groups to take things into community ownership. At the same time, we have made important long-term commitments in Northern Ireland, as in Scotland and Wales, through the city and growth deals. In Northern Ireland, those are worth £670 million—funding that is being matched by the Northern Ireland Executive. That is in addition to Northern Ireland-specific schemes, such as Peace Plus.

One of the challenges on my mind, as a Minister, is how we can all work together to ensure that the schemes work in such a way that they are more than the sum of their parts. I am conscious that there are a number of different schemes there; how do we ensure that the totality of the opportunities in Northern Ireland, which are very exciting, are best served by the confluence of all these different funding streams? It is useful, through the UKSPF, to have some funding that is not challenge-based but formula-based, and therefore, in that sense, a bit more flexible to provide bits of match funding to complement those other, existing funding streams.

Patricia Gibson: The Minister mentioned the importance of his Government working in partnership with the devolved Governments. I am sure we are all pleased to hear that. Would he therefore like to comment on the conclusion of the House of Lords Constitution Committee in its report in January that the UK Government have ignored—and continue to ignore—devolution and the devolved Governments in this process?

Neil O'Brien: There will always be a range of views on these questions. As my Secretary of State set out in his evidence to the Scottish Parliament the other day, our strong belief is that all these things will work best if we can engage not just the devolved Governments but local partners across the whole UK.

It is worth putting these issues in the context of the wider funding settlement, as well as the funds that are specific for regeneration and community renewal. In the spending review, hon. Members will have seen that we have £15 billion for Northern Ireland annually for the next three years—the highest figure since devolution. There will be £41 billion for Scotland—again, the highest figure since devolution—and £18 billion for Wales, which

is, again, the largest figure, in real terms, since devolution. So the context is that of a wider public spending settlement, and although we would always like to have more money to do things, that will enable us to do some really important things for some communities, particularly in Northern Ireland, which experienced extremely high levels of deprivation—I think that we would all recognise that.

Hon. Members have raised some of the things that the community renewal fund is doing. I would stress some of the positive things that that funding is doing, which leads into the work of the shared prosperity fund. The hon. Member for Belfast South rightly quoted the wise comment of her former leader that the best peace process is a job.

The hon. Member for North Down stressed the importance of skills—again, quite rightly. The community renewal fund is giving half a million pounds to the NOW Group to support people with disabilities through specialised employment academies and job mentoring. It is also giving nearly half a million pounds to South West College, Southern Regional College and Queen's University Belfast to upskill construction operatives to fill that skills gap, and there will be just over £500,000 for a hydrogen training academy to deliver training for 180 people, to get a skilled workforce that can take advantage of the exciting opportunities that are opening up in Northern Ireland in hydrogen and clean technology. Those funds are doing a great deal of good. By working together, we will get the most out of these different spending streams.

The hon. Member for North Down asked a specific and very important question about section 75. We understand the importance of respecting the unique equalities considerations in Northern Ireland. We recognise the importance of not only meeting our legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010 but giving due regard to the additional equalities considerations that apply in Northern Ireland. I hope it is obvious from the tenor of my comments and from what I have said today that we are always—always—keen to have solutions that are felt to be fair by all communities and that see all communities working together.

I thank hon. Members, who have put forward genuinely important points in today's debate. Over the coming weeks, we will work with other parts of the Government—represented here today—as well as partners across the UK, to finalise our policy development. Later in the spring, we intend to publish the full UK shared prosperity fund prospectus.

I hope I have got across in my comments the sense that our intent is not to go over the heads of anybody but to enable devolved Governments, local government and other partners to shape what is done in different parts of the UK and where the money goes, and to be involved in generating and contributing ideas at all levels, so that we can make the most of the opportunities that we collectively share. That is the tenor of where we are coming from on this entire agenda.

Once we have done that—we will be doing it, as Members can probably tell from the meetings I have talked about that are under way or that are forthcoming—we will publish the full UK shared prosperity fund prospectus. We want to try to keep the process as simple as we can so that we can give local partners the information they need to begin investment planning. I genuinely look forward to working with hon. Members from

across this House; a number of them have already come to me with important suggestions and ideas about things we can do on this agenda. I look forward to working with all Members who are here today to deliver on our shared ambition.

5.27 pm

Claire Hanna: I thank Members for their participation and for their points. My constituency near-neighbour, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I concede it is a very beautiful place—set a very helpful and constructive tone, but Members across the House have reflected a concern or two. Colleagues coming from different political perspectives in Wales were certainly on the same page about the risks to devolution and the anxiety that the gaps in information have created.

The hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) asked some key questions, based on his experience as a skills and employment Minister with a lot of first-hand experience of driving and directing the predecessor funds. He asked some important questions about equality impact assessments, particularly in relation to Northern Ireland.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) gave a comprehensive and convincing summary of Scotland's concerns and presented some very stark figures that I, too, would have liked to hear the Minister's response to and that I completely understand will have breached the faith and confidence of people in Scotland.

The hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) and the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who is the chair of the all-party parliamentary group, reflected the concerns about a Whitehall-led, top-down approach. I was made aware that at a 2019 Conservative leadership hustings in Cardiff, the now Prime Minister pledged a strong Conservative influence over these funds, but people in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and many other parts of the UK have expressed different aspirations and have different needs, which must be respected and protected.

Delivery partners with decades of experience, as well as ideas and track records, are clearly ready across the different regions to play a part, to build the economy and to ensure that everybody has the skills and the capacity to access the economy. However, there needs to be a joined-up approach. The Minister referred to the city deals, which work precisely because they work from the bottom up, catalysing private investment and doing so by having direct partnerships with local business and research partnerships.

As I say, seeing is believing. I gave the example that in Northern Ireland a vacuum of information was followed by an alarming allocation that raised even the most benign eyebrows in Northern Ireland. So I appreciate the tone of the Minister's response about how people will be engaged, but I have to say that, in the absence of further information on the parameters of the fund and how it will engage with devolved Administrations, we remain to be convinced.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the shared prosperity fund and the devolved Administrations.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 1 March 2022

TREASURY

Prudential Regulation of Credit Institutions and Investment Firms

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Following the global financial crisis, the international Basel Committee on Banking Supervision (BCBS) agreed standards for prudential regulation to improve the resilience of the banking sector. Prudential regulation ensures that banks, building societies, and investment firms control risk and hold sufficient capital to better absorb economic shocks.

The UK has played an active role in negotiating and agreeing these standards—commonly known as the “Basel 3” standards—and has always been committed to their implementation. The Financial Services Act 2021 (the “FS Act”) was introduced to enable the PRA—as experts—to implement these standards.

The FS Act also introduced the framework for the investment firms prudential regime (IFPR), a bespoke prudential regime for investment firms that do not pose a systemic risk to the financial system, to be implemented by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA).

This instrument is part of a package of instruments which supports the implementation of the IFPR and Basel 3 standards.

The purpose of this instrument is to:

- make changes, including consequential amendments, to primary, secondary, and retained EU law following the introduction of the IFPR and implementation of the Basel 3 standards on 1 January 2022.

- make transitional provision for certain securitisations following the implementation of the IFPR. These provisions support requirements which aim to align the interests of the sell-side parties in a securitisation (e.g. lenders) and the buy-side parties (e.g. investors), by ensuring the sell-side parties retain some risk in the product.

- make amendments to the Banking Act 2009 to ensure that short-term liabilities owed to investment firms with permission to underwrite or deal on own account will continue to be exempt from bail-in.

- address legal deficiencies arising from the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union.

This instrument will primarily be made under the powers in the Financial Services Act 2021. It also uses powers in the Banking Act 2009 and the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

As required under the “enhanced scrutiny procedure” set out in schedule 8 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, the draft instrument and explanatory memorandum will be published online for a period of at least 28 days before the instrument is formally laid in Parliament. To read the full draft statutory instrument and explanatory memorandum, please visit:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-financial-services-act-2021-prudential-regulation-of-credit-institutions-and-investment-firms-consequential-amendments-and-miscellaneous-provis>

[HCWS650]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Draft Telecoms Security Regulations and Code of Practice: Consultation

The Minister for Media, Data and Digital Infrastructure (Julia Lopez): The Government want to ensure that the UK has world-class fixed and wireless digital infrastructure as soon as possible, unlocking the huge economic and social benefits these will bring. As we become more dependent on these technologies, their security and resilience becomes vital. That is why the Telecommunications (Security) Act was passed last year to deliver important improvements to the security of public telecoms networks and services within the UK.

The new telecoms security framework established by the Act is designed to ensure public telecoms providers protect vulnerable parts of their networks and services. The overarching security duties inserted into the Communications Act 2003 will be accompanied by specific security measures contained in regulations. A code of practice will provide detailed technical guidance on the actions providers can take to meet their legal obligations.

I am pleased to inform the House that we have today published a consultation on the draft regulations and a code of practice. The Act requires the Government to consult on any codes of practice that are issued or revised. Given the need to ensure appropriate and proportionate secondary legislation for the initial implementation of the new framework, today’s consultation also extends to the regulations. These were developed through engagement with the National Cyber Security Centre, industry and Ofcom. The responses to the consultation will be used to inform the final regulations and security measures contained in the code of practice.

Telecommunications policy is reserved and the Communications Act applies and extends across the UK.

I have placed a copy of the consultation in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS646]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19: Vaccination as a Condition of Deployment

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid):

Covid-19 vaccination as a condition of deployment—revocation consultation response

On 31 January I announced this Government’s intention to revoke the regulations making covid-19 vaccination a condition of deployment in all health and social care settings, subject to consultation and parliamentary procedure.

My statement before the House on 31 January made clear that vaccination as a condition of deployment was the right policy when the original decision was taken, but that it is no longer proportionate in the light of the most recent clinical evidence regarding the current omicron variant of covid-19, which is intrinsically less severe than Delta, and the high rate of vaccination across the population.

On 9 February Government published a consultation document, “Revoking vaccination as a condition of deployment across all health and social care”. The consultation outlined the latest clinical evidence and the proposed way forward, and sought views from all interested parties on whether the regulations should be revoked, as well as what further steps could be taken to increase vaccine uptake.

The consultation received over 90,000 responses from across the health and social care sector, as well as from members of the public. My Department also conducted engagement sessions with sector representatives. I am grateful to all those who have taken the time to respond to the consultation.

My Department’s officials have carefully analysed the consultation responses. The vast majority of the feedback received supported revocation, with 90% of respondents agreeing that the requirement for covid-19 vaccination as a condition of deployment in health and social care settings should be revoked.

I have considered this strong preference for revocation, the relevant equalities assessment, and the scientific evidence. I have concluded that it is right and proportionate to proceed with revocation of covid-19 vaccination as a condition of deployment in all health and social care settings, and have today published the Government’s full response to the consultation on www.gov.uk. I am also laying the regulations to revoke vaccination as a condition of deployment today. These regulations will come into force on 15 March, and will remove the requirements already in place in care homes, as well as those due to come into force in health and wider social care settings on 1 April 2022.

Irrespective of this step, and while we have a number of defences and mitigations in place, such as antivirals and personal protective equipment, vaccination continues to be our most important weapon in the fight against covid-19. I have made it clear that I consider it a professional responsibility for health and care staff, and others who work in the health and social care sectors, to be vaccinated, and I am glad to note that the professional regulators, the Royal Colleges, the chief medical officer, the chief nursing officer, and the chief midwifery officer among others, agree with this. It is encouraging that 92% of the NHS workforce and 95% of care home staff are now vaccinated with two doses, while 89% of home—domiciliary—care staff have so far received at least one dose of the vaccine.

This Government are committed to working with the health and social care sectors to engage with those who are yet to make the positive choice to be vaccinated. In adult social care, the vaccine boosters taskforce has published a paper to support good practice for driving booster vaccination in England. In addition, Government have committed to consulting on updating the code of practice on the prevention and control of infections, which applies to all Care Quality Commission registered providers of all healthcare and social care in England, to strengthen requirements in relation to covid-19, including reflecting the latest advice on infection prevention control.

While we commit to these actions, we also have measures in place to ensure that those most vulnerable to covid-19 remain protected in health and social care settings, as well as across the country. While the shielding programme ended on 15 September 2021, we have made new antibody and antiviral treatments available to people

who are at highest risk of becoming seriously ill who test positive for covid-19, to help reduce the development of severe covid-19. On 21 February 2022, Government launched their living with covid-19 plan. The plan confirms that both NHS and adult social care will continue to provide access to free PPE to the end of March 2023, or until the IPC guidance on PPE usage for covid-19 is amended or superseded. Revocation of these regulations plays an important and proportionate role within Government’s approach in ensuring that our entire society, including the health and social care sectors, can learn to safely live with covid-19.

The Government’s response to the consultation is published on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS654]

Parliamentary Question 496: Correction

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): I would like to inform the House that a written answer given by the previous Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, the Minister for Prevention, Public Health and Primary Care, on 18 May 2021, parliamentary question 496, was incorrect.

In the response to written question 496, we stated that Public Health England had undertaken an assessment of technologies regarding inactivation methods against covid-19, including the use of UV-C and H202 vapour. However, this information was inaccurate. Public Health England did not make any such assessment. Rather, the UK Health and Safety Laboratory assessed the potential merits of hydroxyl free radical air purification technologies in response to the covid-19 outbreak.

[HCWS648]

Parliamentary Question 77467: Correction

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): I would like to inform the House that a written answer I gave on 26 November 2021 to parliamentary question 77467, to the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) was incomplete.

Adult social care is largely a devolved matter. However, I recognise that in the original answer that stated the devolved nature of adult social care, it was implied that the health and social care levy is devolved, when it is reserved.

As stated by Her Majesty’s Treasury in their PQ reply on 14 December 2021(90439), the Government have made many assessments of the overall impact of the introduction of the health and social care levy, which were published alongside the announcement. These include the distributional analysis of the impact of the combined tax and spending announcements, a technical annex in the Government’s plan for health and social care and a tax information and impact note.

The revenues generated by the levy will support the health and care sectors across the UK, and DHSC will continue to work closely with devolved Governments at both official and ministerial level. The Secretary of State for Health has discussed the levy with Health Ministers from each devolved Government who are keen to ensure that the revenues raised by the levy benefit citizens across the UK.

[HCWS647]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): Following the announcement made by the Prime Minister in his statement on Thursday 24 February in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Government are today introducing the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill. The introduction of these measures will enable us to counter illicit financial activity from Russia, enforce sanctions and help in the wider fight against grand corruption and serious crime.

The Bill has three key components:

The introduction of a Register of Overseas Entities (ROE) to require anonymous foreign owners of UK property to reveal their real identities to help address risks of money laundering through our property market.

Reforms to the Unexplained Wealth Order (UWO) powers, which will enable our law enforcement agencies to take more effective action against corrupt elites and criminals, compelling them to prove the origins of their funds in the UK.

Changes to the current sanctions regime to enhance financial sanctions enforcement.

These new measures will be followed up with a further economic crime Bill which will be introduced in the coming months.

[HCWS653]

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse: Residential Schools Report

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Rachel Maclean): Today, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (NCSA) published its investigation report on residential schools.

The report relates to the NCSA's investigations into the extent of any institutional failures to protect children in residential schools.

I pay tribute to the strength and courage of the victims and survivors who have shared their experiences to ensure the inquiry can deliver its vital work.

The Government will review this report and consider how to respond to its content in due course. I would like to thank Professor Jay and her panel for their continued work to uncover the truth, identify what went wrong in the past and to learn the lessons for the future.

This report has been laid before the House today, and it will also be published on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS651]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

United Kingdom-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): On 28 February 2022, the Government signed the UK-New Zealand free trade agreement. The deal deepens the special bonds of friendship between two like-minded democracies and reflects our commitment to free and fair trade as a powerful force for good.

It is the second free trade agreement negotiated "from scratch" since the UK left the European Union and, alongside the deal signed with Australia, contributes to the UK's ambitions in the fast-growing Asia-Pacific region. New Zealand supports our bid to join the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership—CPTPP—which includes economies with a joint GDP of £8.4 trillion in 2020.

This agreement delivers the benefits of trade to people, businesses and communities based across the United Kingdom, helping level up our country. The UK-New Zealand trade relationship was worth £2.3 billion in 2020. The agreement is expected to significantly increase this—it is expected to increase bilateral trade by almost 60%, boosting the economy by £800 million and increasing wages across the UK in the long run.

It breaks new ground in areas such as gender equality and consumer protection—with a focus on promoting the interests of small and medium-sized enterprises across the agreement. The deal also includes an ambitious environment chapter that sets new precedents and reinforces our commitments to the Paris agreement and our efforts to meet net zero. Finally, it also reflects our countries' unique relationship, and the importance for New Zealand of protecting and advancing Māori interests.

The UK Government have published an unnumbered Command Paper titled "Informational Copy of the UK-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement and associated documents, including the Impact Assessment and draft Explanatory Memorandum". Copies of these have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS649]

TRANSPORT

Local Transport: Covid-19 Recovery

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Government have provided unprecedented financial support to the bus and light rail sectors, in England outside London. Through the emergency covid-19 funding packages, the Government ensured the immediate impacts of the pandemic on bus and light rail networks were mitigated ensuring services kept running to enable access to jobs, education, and healthcare. In the recovery period, the latest packages, the £226.5 million bus recovery grant (BRG) and the £56 million light rail and tram recovery grant (LRTRG), due to end in April 2022, have supported the sector following the re-opening of the economy and the lifting of social distancing guidelines. We have also provided a further £29 million uplift to the BRG, to mitigate the impact of omicron on patronage over winter.

As the sector continues to deal with the ongoing effects of the pandemic and the emergence of new travel patterns, the financial challenges faced by the bus and light rail sector remain. The Department recognises the importance local transport services have to the people and economies of the areas they serve and understands that the removal of funding now would create a cliff edge with the prospect of overnight reductions in services. Such an outcome would undermine our aspirations set out in the national bus strategy and levelling up White Papers to improve transport connectivity.

I can therefore announce that we will provide over £150 million in further financial support to the local transport sector. This will fund bus operators and local authorities responsible for bus and light rail services from April until October and is the final covid-19 support package the Government will provide to the sector. The funding will assist local transport authorities and operators in running services as they develop new, effective, financially sustainable networks that cater for the needs of the local public and their local areas after the pandemic.

This package of funding shows our commitment to the development of effective financial sustainability plans, taking into account user needs. It will maximise public confidence in local transport, while aligning with our key aims from the national bus strategy, to deliver better bus services.

[HCWS652]

WALES

Veterans Commissioner for Wales

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): The Minister for Defence People and Veterans and I are pleased to inform the House that the Government have appointed Colonel James Phillips as the first ever Veterans Commissioner for Wales.

The commissioner will act as an ambassador for veterans across all areas of Wales and will play a key role in making the United Kingdom the best place in the world to be a veteran. The role will build on the success of counterpart roles in Scotland and Northern Ireland and will mean that all devolved nations have a Veterans' Commissioner.

Colonel James Phillips has just completed his own transition to civilian life after 33 years in the Army. He has served in Germany, Cyprus, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq. He has commanded soldiers, sailors and air personnel and worked in NATO, MOD, joint and Army headquarters.

Colonel James Phillips will take up the role as soon as possible after 1 April 2022.

The strategic objective of the Veterans' Commissioner for Wales will be to improve outcomes for veterans, their families and armed forces families across Wales, building on the significant work already undertaken by the UK Government and within the Welsh Government's devolved responsibilities. They will work with existing networks and Welsh Government governance structures supporting existing work to deliver the UK Government strategy for our veterans. A fundamental element of this role will be to engage with veterans and their families, listen to their needs and aspirations, and identify any need for positive change, encourage and share areas of good practice communicating these to both the UK and Welsh Governments.

The responsibilities of the Veterans Commissioner for Wales will be:

- To listen to and understand the issues and barriers affecting veterans and their families, and using the information to influence improvement in services;

- To improve outcomes for veterans and their families through collaboration that will build upon and complement the work of the Welsh Government, public bodies and key stakeholders;

- Work with the Welsh Government and key stakeholders to recognise areas of need in service provision and identify the means to address those needs;

- Improve co-ordination and integration across services where appropriate to facilitate better communication and outcomes;

- To build the profile of veterans and promote wider recognition of the skills, experiences and talents of veterans and the valued contributions they make to communities and employers;

- To work with public service providers to support the understanding of the UK Government's new legislation on "no disadvantage";

- and recognise that armed forces and veterans' families also require support, including during periods of transition

[HCWS645]

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**not later than
Tuesday 8 March 2022**

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