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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 8 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: Order. Before we start today's business, I want to inform the House that I have received a request from President Zelensky of Ukraine to address Members of this House at 5 o'clock today. Given the exceptional and grave situation in Ukraine, I have agreed to the request. Today's business will therefore be interrupted at 4.45 pm to enable Members to be in their places by 5 o'clock. The House will formally suspend, but Members will be welcome to remain in the Chamber to listen to the address from President Zelensky, which will be shown on the screens within the Chamber. A limited number of headphones will be made available so that Members can hear the simultaneous interpretation of the address. This will not be part of the formal sitting of the House. After the President's address, we will suspend briefly before reverting to our formal business.

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Russia: Sanctions

1. **Dehenna Davison** (Bishop Auckland) (Con): What recent legislative steps her Department has taken to help strengthen the sanctions regime against Russia. [905920]

2. **Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): What recent legislative steps her Department has taken to help strengthen the sanctions regime against Russia. [905921]

21. **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the impact of UK sanctions imposed to date on (a) individuals and (b) entities associated with the conflict in Ukraine. [905942]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): Together with our G7 allies, we have put the toughest sanctions on Russia in our history. We have sanctioned 228 individuals and entities. Our bank sanctions target £259 billion-worth of assets, compared with £240 billion by the US and £34 billion by the EU. We have also targeted more defence companies, cut access to British ports and closed airspace. Yesterday, this House passed new legislation to speed up the sanctioning of oligarchs, and from next Tuesday we will be able to do all of them.

Dehenna Davison: A huge number of Bishop Auckland residents have contacted me expressing their concerns about the ongoing situation in Ukraine, so I am grateful to hear about the Foreign Secretary's robust action. Following the amendments to our sanctions regime yesterday through the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill, does she agree that that will allow us to hit Putin's allies harder and faster?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right. Amendments from the House of Lords to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 made it cumbersome and slow for us to sanction those individuals. They included making unlimited damages available to those individuals as well as requiring an impact test under the Human Rights Act. Yesterday's Bill removes all of that, which means that by 15 March we will be able to sanction hundreds of individuals.

Virginia Crosbie: Given the barbaric invasion of Ukraine by Russia, the threats to cut off gas supplies to the west and the rising energy prices here in the UK, will the Secretary of State join me in calling for the continued expansion of renewable energy and for massively expanding and accelerating the UK's nuclear programme to ensure that we meet net zero, dramatically lower our energy prices and ensure that we can never be held to ransom over our energy supplies?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right. The west can no longer be reliant on Russian oil and gas. We need to end dependency by agreeing ceilings with our G7 partners, agreeing a timetable for reduction and helping through price support and supply support those countries that are very dependent. Of course, nuclear and renewable energy will play a vital role in moving forward.

Matt Western: Targeted sanctions are critical if we are to avoid significant collateral economic damage. However, despite what the Government may claim, the facts speak for themselves. According to Castellan AI, the total number of sanctions placed on Russia since 2014 by country is as follows: the US, 1,200; Canada, 900; Switzerland, 800; the EU, 766; and the UK, just 271. This is not leadership, is it? Why are the Government so slow?

Elizabeth Truss: We have led on cutting Russia off from SWIFT. We have led on closing our airspace and closing our ports. If we look at the total financial impact—the aim here is to debilitate the Russian economy—we can see that the sanctions we have put on banks, defence, aviation and oligarchs add up to £364 billion. In the US, they add up to £340 billion, and in the EU, they add up to £124 billion. We have to look at the overall financial impact, and it is much higher for the UK than for our allies. Of course we encourage them all to do more, and we need to work together.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Will the Foreign Secretary speak to her colleague, the Home Secretary, about the cruel and chaotic way in which desperate Ukrainian refugees are being treated by the Home Office? It cannot be right that there is no visa application centre in Calais, with Ukrainian refugees who have travelled thousands of miles to Calais being redirected either to Paris or to Brussels. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that this brings the UK into disrepute?

Elizabeth Truss: The Home Office has placed staff in Poland and Hungary to help people, and the Home Secretary has announced a new pop-up application site in Lille. I can tell the right hon. Member that the Home Office has set up a surgery for MPs in Portcullis House, to which I am sure she will be very welcome to take any cases.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): On International Women's Day, does the Foreign Secretary agree that one way to amplify the message we are sending to Russia through sanctions would be to call on every woman in Russia—the mothers, sisters, daughters, aunts and friends of those in the Russian army who are attacking a neighbouring state and causing such misery and suffering—to send a message to those soldiers to stop it and return home?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right that; as well as the huge humanitarian crisis for the people of Ukraine, we are seeing the death of many Russian soldiers, many of whom have been sent to Ukraine under false pretences such as the claim that the Ukrainian people want liberation, which simply is not true. As we warned in advance of this invasion, President Putin has sent thousands of young Russian men and women to their death. That message is being received in Russia.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary, David Lammy.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Two weeks into this awful war, Ukraine has suffered terribly but stands defiant. Putin is isolated, his economy is in freefall and his actions are condemned around the world. We are united in our desire to ratchet up pressure on Putin, but the UK has sanctioned just eight of the Navalny 35 list of oligarchs. The EU has sanctioned 19 and the US has sanctioned 15. We welcome the Government's U-turn on sanctions legislation yesterday, which should help us to catch up, but sanctions against oligarchs work only if we know where their wealth is hidden. Will the Government commit to urgently reforming Companies House, to leave Putin-linked crooks with nowhere to hide?

Elizabeth Truss: First, the right hon. Gentleman needs to look at the overall size of our sanctions. The UK has targeted £364 billion-worth of assets, whereas the US has targeted £340 billion and the EU has targeted £124 billion. We have led the way, whether on SWIFT, freezing bank assets or closing ports.

As for the right hon. Gentleman's point about the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, it was the Labour party that wanted changes to make it tougher for us to sanction oligarchs. The hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), who is now chair of the Labour party, said on Third Reading that the Act gives Ministers "excessive power" that could not be "justified by the need for speed".—[*Official Report*, 1 May 2018; Vol. 640, c. 239.]

She even called for additional bureaucracy through a cross-Whitehall committee. The U-turn is on their side.

Mr Lammy: The world watched Putin's premeditated stalking of Ukraine. We saw the lies, the false diplomacy and the manufactured grievances, and then we witnessed the destructive invasion of a sovereign state. This is a

crime of aggression. The creation of a special tribunal will help the global community to hold Vladimir Putin and his cronies personally responsible for this war, and it would complement the International Criminal Court's investigation. Ukraine's Foreign Minister backs it, several of our allies and partners back it and leading lawyers back it. Will the Foreign Secretary now do the same?

Elizabeth Truss: I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman that we are seeing horrific crimes taking place in Ukraine, and they are the responsibility of President Putin. That is why the United Kingdom has worked with our allies to put a case to the ICC—there were 38 states, making it the biggest ever group referral to the ICC. That is the right route to tackle the war crimes that we consider could have taken place or are taking place in Ukraine. We want to work with countries to collect the evidence. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Justice will be travelling to The Hague to work on that specific issue.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I very much welcome the strong package of sanctions imposed by the Government, but if President Putin is to understand that we are serious, he also needs to know that we are going to be able to sustain that package over a considerable time. He will believe that only if we are honest with the public that that will mean not just a cost to Russia but a significant economic cost here. We have to make the argument that it is necessary to pay for it, in order to keep us safe and secure in the future, and I urge the Foreign Secretary to do so.

Elizabeth Truss: Of course, there will be an economic cost to these sanctions for British people, in their energy bills and in the cost of living, but that cost is nothing compared with the cost to the people of Ukraine of the horrific barbarism that they are facing or with the cost of allowing Putin to succeed. We know that if Putin does not lose in Ukraine, it will not be the limit of his ambitions. He has already been clear that he wants to see a greater Russia, which could encompass countries such as Moldova and the Baltic states. So it is vital that we throw everything at sanctions, and we help as much as we can with getting defensive weaponry into Ukraine, because this is a battle that Putin needs to lose.

Mr Speaker: We come to the Scottish National party spokesperson, Alyn Smith.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): The SNP has supported the Government's efforts on Ukraine. We took some criticism for that, but it was the right thing to do. In that spirit, I have to say that there is mounting frustration on these Benches at the lack of progress on and ambition in the UK's sanctions regime. The rhetoric is simply not matched by the reality, which is that the European Union has gone further and faster on these sanctions matters. I urge the Foreign Secretary to work more closely with the EU, particularly on the due diligence on individual sanctions, and to replicate the EU's sanctions in order to complement the EU's efforts and have a much more comprehensive sanctions regime, rather than sending it a nice letter with a month's notice to sort its financial affairs.

Elizabeth Truss: What the hon. Gentleman says simply is not the case. We are seeking to debilitate the Russian economy. We have targeted and sanctioned £364 billion-worth of assets, whereas the EU has targeted £124 billion. Yes, there are specific issues over individuals, which we are addressing through the emergency legislation that went through the House which will be in place next week. We will be able to sanction all the individuals that he is referring to. It is simply not true to say that the UK has not led on this, as we have. We led on SWIFT, on banning ships from British ports, which I know he was arguing for last week, and on closing airspace to Russian planes. What he is saying simply is not true.

Support for Ukraine

3. **Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support Ukraine. [905922]

5. **Aaron Bell** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support Ukraine. [905924]

10. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support Ukraine. [905930]

18. **Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support Ukraine. [905939]

19. **Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support Ukraine. [905940]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): The UK has been at the forefront of diplomatic, economic, humanitarian and defensive support to Ukraine. The UK was the first European country to provide lethal aid to Ukraine, and my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary is convening a group of countries to do more of that. We are the largest bilateral donor of humanitarian aid to Ukraine, including with our largest ever UK Aid Match contribution to the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal, which has now raised more than £100 million.

Douglas Ross: The Russian forces are doing to Ukraine what they supported the Assad regime to do in Syria: starve, bomb and target civilians, schools and hospitals. In Syria, with the support and funding of the UK Government, the White Helmets provided vital search and rescue services and other crucial support. That saved thousands of lives and helped to document the atrocities. Will the Foreign Secretary commit to supporting a similar organisation in Ukraine, to save lives there?

Elizabeth Truss: What is happening in Ukraine is simply abhorrent. Our current priority is supporting Ukraine through humanitarian aid. We are donating £220 million of humanitarian aid, which is the leading figure in the world. That will be used to save lives and protect vulnerable people. However, I will listen to my hon. Friend's suggestion and see what we can do on that front, because we need to do all we can to address this horrendous humanitarian crisis.

Aaron Bell: I know that my right hon. Friend is as proud as I am that the sanctions on Russia that we have introduced to try to support Ukraine are the most powerful we have ever introduced in history. Does she agree that we may need to go further and that nothing

should be off the table in terms of who or what we target? We need to do whatever it takes to cripple the Putin regime.

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right: nothing is off the table. We have been and are working with G7 partners, whom we want to see go further in areas such as a complete ban on SWIFT and the complete freezing of all bank assets, and by committing to a timetable for reducing dependency on oil and gas because, fundamentally, Russia is a state propped up by the oil and gas industry and, to really tackle the funding for Putin's war machine, we need to cut off that funding stream.

Selaine Saxby: Since Russia's invasion began we have seen horrific violence from President Putin against an independent sovereign nation. I know the Government will continue to support Ukraine against this barbarism and help her to return to safety. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that while the violence is ongoing we will do all we can to offer humanitarian support in the best interests of the Ukrainian people? Will she detail how communities such as North Devon can assist?

Elizabeth Truss: We have deployed humanitarian teams to neighbouring countries—Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Moldova—and they are working closely with local agencies. We have put a record sum into the DEC appeal, which is generating massive donations from the British public. It is important that, rather than donate goods, the public are encouraged to donate cash to the DEC appeal or other trusted charities and aid organisations. The Polish Government have said that donations in kind generate disproportionate amounts of additional work and costs, which prove ineffective and counterproductive to the needs of those affected, so I strongly encourage people to donate financially to the DEC appeal. That is the best way to get funding through to the brave aid workers on the frontline.

Caroline Ansell: On Saturday, I attended a rally in my home town of Eastbourne where people demonstrated their solidarity with Ukraine and, as my right hon. Friend said, donated to the DEC appeal. That same morning, we saw a series of televised images of very sick children having to be evacuated from the sanctuary and specialist care of their hospital setting, under bombardment. What medical support are we providing to Ukraine and neighbouring countries so that those little lambs have a chance?

Elizabeth Truss: The United Kingdom is the No. 1 donor of humanitarian aid to Ukraine, with £220 million, and we are doing more than any other country on medical support, with the sixth flight of medical supplies having gone out to Ukraine last night. I assure my hon. Friend that Foreign Office teams and Ministry of Defence teams are actively supporting efforts to get very ill children out of Ukraine so that they can get the medical support they need.

Robbie Moore: I welcome the Government's actions in response to the distressing humanitarian situation in Ukraine. Across Keighley and Ilkley we are all deeply concerned about the deteriorating events. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the substantial funding the

Government have put in place will deliver vital support to aid agencies as they respond to this distressing deteriorating situation?

Elizabeth Truss: We can all see how terrible the situation is, with 2 million people fleeing Ukraine. As I have outlined, we are providing humanitarian assistance. We are providing Ukrainians with access to basic necessities and vital medical supplies, as people are forced to flee their homes. We will continue to work with our friends and allies throughout Europe to deliver as much as we can to those in need.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary knows that a vital way to help Ukraine is to prevent those who have stolen money from the Russian people from hiding it in our capital city, but after years of austerity, our hollowed-out enforcement agencies simply do not have the resources to go toe to toe with billionaire oligarchs. The world's other major financial centre, New York, does not have the same problem and takes a much more robust and well-resourced approach to the tackling of illicit finances. Will the Foreign Secretary acknowledge that unless we properly fund our law agencies that can tackle illicit funding, we can have all the tough laws in the world but people will still see the UK as a soft touch?

Elizabeth Truss: We have established a cross-Government taskforce to enforce the laws that we are putting in place on oligarchs. It is important to know that the legislation that we passed yesterday will reduce the amount of bureaucracy required to sanction oligarchs. That will help us to target our resources better across Government, so that we can focus more of our efforts on enforcement. I was asked earlier about further measures on transparency. Those are all being introduced and we are very committed to doing that.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I was speaking to Ukrainian friends of mine who live in Kendal just a day or two ago. They have family in Kyiv and family in Crimea. In Kyiv, they know exactly, tragically, what is going on. In Crimea, they are completely in the dark and fed only what Putin tells them. Does the right hon. Lady agree that one way we can help Crimea and the whole of Ukraine is to ensure that people in Russia and Russian-controlled territories know the truth of the murderous barbarity being done in their name? Will she be encouraged—I am sure she is—by the fact that, in the past week, visits to the BBC's Russian language website have trebled? However, that is only 10 million people, and there are 150 million people in Russia. How can she help us to ensure that information gets to the Russian people?

Mr Speaker: Tim, do not take advantage, please.

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the importance of the BBC in communicating to the Russian people. The fact is that they have been lied to for years through disinformation via state TV, and we are now seeing Putin taking even more repressive measures to stop social media. One factor of this crisis is that young people in Russia are less likely to believe the regime because they have had access to social media. Putin is now trying to cut that off. We are working with social media companies to see what we can do. We have

established a cross-Government information unit to communicate with the Russian people directly in the Russian language. Moreover, one impact of sanctions—and a reason why we have targeted banks—is that they send a message to the Russian people when they are forced to queue for money, when they cannot get on the tube, or when they cannot access the normal services that they have been accessing. I welcome the actions of corporates in Britain to withdraw their services from Russia. The message must get across to the Russian people that this appalling war is being fought in their name.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): On the referral to the International Criminal Court, what more can be done to assist in the collection and preservation of evidence, including forensic evidence, of potential war crimes? I ask the question because, if that evidence is held in towns that, heaven forbid, the Russians eventually take, by the time the International Criminal Courts asks for it, it may no longer exist.

Elizabeth Truss: On our ICC referral to the prosecutor, which is now being taken forward, we are working closely with our allies on helping to collect that evidence. It is important that we did that early on. This is being led by the Justice Secretary who, as I have said, will be visiting The Hague to work out how we can make sure that that evidence is collected. May I praise the brave British journalists who are currently operating in Ukraine? We saw a terrible attack on the Sky team—completely unforgivable action by the Russian army. Those journalists are valuable in helping to collect the horrendous evidence of what is happening.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Ukraine's national debt is already crippling its economy. In 2020, the debt stood at \$94 billion. At this truly dark moment, it is unconscionable that Ukraine should be required to service that debt or to take on more. Can the Secretary of State tell us whether she has had any conversations with other Governments, the IMF, the World Bank, the G7 or EU Foreign Ministers about sweeping debt cancellation for Ukraine—perhaps along the lines of the mutual aid agreement struck by the allies in world war two?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has been discussing that with G7 Finance Ministers. We are doing all we can to support Ukraine, enabling it to have the finances that it needs both to resist Russian aggression and also, eventually, to be able to rebuild its country after this horrendous invasion.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), who asked the first question on this. Like all bullies, Vladimir Putin demonstrates horrific patterns of behaviour. He helped to starve Syrians in Aleppo and elsewhere, and now he is obliterating Ukrainian cities. But do we not also have to look at our own patterns of behaviour? I see the same administrative failures that hampered our response to Syrian refugees now limiting that desire that the British public have to help Ukrainian refugees. That administrative incompetence is harming our approach. What consideration has the Foreign Secretary made of the effect of the Home Office's inadequacies on Foreign Office objectives?

Elizabeth Truss: We do have to learn the lessons of the past 15 or 20 years, where we did not do enough to tackle Putin and Russia, we allowed the build-up of force and we did not respond strongly enough to what happened in Crimea and the Donbas. I am determined to do things differently. That is why the UK is leading not only on diplomacy, but on the toughest possible sanctions and the toughest possible support for the Ukrainian people in their resistance. I have already briefed the House on the Home Secretary's roll-out of new centres to help Ukrainian people with visas. She has opened up a family route and a sponsored humanitarian route, and we continue to take that forward. We are open for refugees.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Minister Catherine West.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Today, on International Women's Day, we see all the women trying to escape with their families, their children and their mothers and fathers to reach places such as Poland, which has offered refuge to some 1 million refugees, and Ireland, which has taken several hundred thousand. Here in the UK, however, barely 100 have been able to find refuge. That is a shameful lack of humanity in the face of the greatest humanitarian catastrophe in Europe since world war two. Does the Secretary of State agree that this paltry effort to offer refuge is a stain on our otherwise commendable effort on the crisis in Ukraine? Will she urgently work with the Home Secretary, shake up the Home Office and get this sorted?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said, the Home Office has opened new centres for people to be able to put in their applications. It is running a 24/7 helpline and has a surgery for MPs in Portcullis House. I also point the hon. Lady to the fact that we are the largest donor of humanitarian aid, with £220 million. We also want to help people to settle in the region; many people coming from Ukraine want to settle locally and we are helping in that effort by sending our humanitarian teams to the region.

Mr Speaker: I call Scottish National party spokesperson Chris Law.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): On International Women's Day, Europe is leading and united in welcoming more than 2 million refugees, almost all of whom are women and children, fleeing the bloody and murderous war by Putin against Ukraine and its citizens. Yet, pitifully, the UK stands at only 300 visas. Shamefully, we learned this morning in *The Daily Telegraph* that while Ireland has waived visas and expects to welcome 100,000 refugees, the UK Government have expressed fears that that would create a drug route to the UK. On the very day that President Zelensky will address this House, does the Foreign Secretary realise that the Home Office's continued xenophobic and inhumane immigration policy must be, for her and her office, a complete humiliation, undermining the support for Ukraine and its people? Will she now call on her colleague the Home Secretary either to reverse that policy, or to resign?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said, we have opened up two new routes. The Home Secretary has opened up a family route and a sponsored humanitarian route. We

are also providing huge support in the region, working closely with the Ukrainian Government and local Governments such as the Polish Government.

Ukraine: Humanitarian Crisis

4. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with international partners on the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. [905923]

14. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with international partners on the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. [905935]

17. **Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Streatham) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with international partners on the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. [905938]

23. **Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): What diplomatic steps she is taking to help ensure the protection of civilians in Ukraine. [905944]

The Minister for Europe and North America (James Cleverly): Russia's assault on Ukraine is unprovoked, premeditated, barbaric and an assault on a sovereign democracy. The UK has committed £220 million of humanitarian assistance to Ukraine and the region. We are in regular contact with our allies across the world, as well as international agencies such as the UN and other humanitarian partners and donors, to assess the needs on the ground and to ensure an internationally co-ordinated response. We call on Russia to respect its obligations under international humanitarian law.

Liz Twist: It is absolutely vital that the humanitarian corridors remain open to facilitate the safe passage of refugees from Ukraine as well as the safe passage of humanitarian aid into the country, so what steps has the Minister taken, in conjunction with NATO allies, to ensure that that happens?

James Cleverly: We note Russia's claim of creating humanitarian corridors. These are just not credible. The current humanitarian corridors that Russia has highlighted lead into Russia, and it is an obscene and offensive gesture to the Ukrainian people to invite them to take refuge in the arms of the country currently seeking to destroy theirs. It is not credible and we call upon Russia to allow proper, meaningful humanitarian access.

Jessica Morden: Constituents trying to help their elderly and disabled relatives out of Ukraine describe their arduous 19-hour journey from the south to Lviv for biometric enrolment due to the lack of safe routes in the south. They are now awaiting appointments in Poland, but who knows how long that will take? They need to know, as others have asked today, what more the Foreign Office will do with the Home Office to make this process quicker and more effective.

James Cleverly: As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said, the Home Office has established a forward presence, including just over the Ukrainian border into Poland, in order to facilitate cases like the one that the hon. Lady has raised. We continue working closely with the Home Office to ensure that its work on receiving Ukrainian refugees is as quick, effective and efficient as possible.

Mr Speaker: I call Bell Ribeiro-Addy. She is not here.

Dan Jarvis: Mariupol has been described as a living hell by those who have been subject to the vicious bombardment in the city. What are the Government doing to get people who are under siege, including brave HALO Trust staff, rescued into some safety?

James Cleverly: The hon. and gallant Gentleman raises an incredibly important point. Our ability to project influence into Ukraine is understandably heavily curtailed. We will continue working to ensure that potential human rights abuses are catalogued and put forward for subsequent trials in the International Criminal Court and other places, if relevant. I take the point about what more can be done to help the brave people who have stayed behind to do great work in Ukraine and what we can do to help them to evacuate the country. I cannot give him details at the moment but his point is well made.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): The Foreign Secretary has spoken about the work ongoing with the Home Office to process applications of refugees coming over the border into Poland, but people are also flooding over the borders into Romania, Hungary, Moldova and other neighbouring countries. What more can we do on the ground in those countries to help to swiftly get people to our shores?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. As we have said, the Home Office has established a forward presence in Poland, but also in the other countries bordering Ukraine, to facilitate the forward passage for those wishing to come to the UK. The Prime Minister and the Home Secretary have made it clear that we intend to have a generous offer to the Ukrainian people of a refuge to those seeking that, and we will continue co-ordinating with the Home Office in its work to establish routes to the UK.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Apart from humanitarian reasons, there are siren voices suggesting that we should commit to a no-fly zone in Ukraine, notwithstanding our existing support to the country and our commitment to article 5 and to NATO. Will the Minister assure the House once again that there is no intention to intervene directly militarily in this war, for a host of reasons, including the fact that it would lead to a wider conflict?

James Cleverly: The UK should be rightly proud of the support that we gave to the Ukrainian armed forces over a number of years through Operation Orbital and through the early deployment of NLAWs, or next generation light anti-tank weapons—the anti-tank missile systems that have proven so effective—and we will continue to provide support to the Ukrainians in their self-defence. The Secretary-General of NATO has made it very clear that it would be wrong for NATO to engage directly in the conflict with Russia that is the inevitable by-product of a no-fly zone. Putin is desperately trying to paint this as western aggression against Russia. We must not do anything that will allow him to perpetrate that perverse distortion of reality.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend having conversations about contingency plans for what will happen if, God forbid, Russian forces start to deliberately attack nuclear facilities near

the western borders? Those plans would need to lead to a mass movement of the refugees already in that area. Would he also agree that that would pretty much constitute an attack on NATO allies?

James Cleverly: We take attacks, or the threat of attacks, against nuclear facilities very seriously. Nuclear safeguarding remains a priority for this Government. I will not be drawn on the conditions of what might be defined as an attack on NATO, but nevertheless we have made it absolutely clear that NATO is a defensive organisation. It has never expanded by force or coercion. Our support to the Ukrainians is steadfast, but there is a clear dividing line between an attack on one of our good friends—Ukraine—and an attack on a NATO member state.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): This International Women's Day, hundreds of thousands of women are massed in the freezing cold at the borders of Ukraine, traumatised children in their arms, as they flee from Putin's bloody, unprovoked war. Families have been separated, thousands of homes have been destroyed, and whole cities have been cut off from water, food, healthcare and other basic services. This is an evolving humanitarian situation, and the pace and scale of displacement is unlike anything we have seen in Europe for a generation. Some 2 million refugees have already fled the country, and millions more may cross the borders in the coming days and weeks.

Can the Minister tell us how much of the £220 million announced for humanitarian aid is actually in Ukraine or helping those who have fled its borders, and will he agree to provide us with a monthly breakdown of pledges against what has been disbursed? We have to act swiftly and we need to know what has been disbursed to date, so will the Minister tell us?

James Cleverly: As the hon. Lady says, this is a rapidly evolving situation. We have made recent announcements of humanitarian support, which are very significant—the largest in the world at this stage. We are more than happy to keep the House up to date with the disbursement of that humanitarian aid, and will do so through the normal means.

India: Economic and Security Relationship

6. **Gareth Davies** (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): What diplomatic steps she has taken to strengthen the UK's economic and security relationship with India. [905925]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford): India is the world's sixth largest economy and an important partner for the UK. In May last year, the UK and India committed to strengthening our economic and security relationship through a new comprehensive strategic partnership. Our trade with, and investment in, India is set to grow further, and we continue to work together on security and defence.

Gareth Davies: Does my hon. Friend agree that the UK's development finance organisation, British International Investment, has a critical role to play in strengthening our economic ties with India and promoting the entrepreneurial spirit that our two countries share?

Vicky Ford: I completely agree about the importance of British International Investment across the world. I point to the firm statement that the Foreign Secretary gave to the Foreign Affairs Committee yesterday, in which she emphasised the need to strengthen our economic and defence relationship with India in order to pull it away from the orbit of authoritarian regimes such as Russia.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): With India arbitrarily detaining UK nationals such as my constituent Jagtar Singh Johal for over four years now and failing to defend the democratic right of national self-determination for Ukraine, can the Minister tell us how the trade negotiations are going?

Vicky Ford: Again, I point to the important statement that the Foreign Secretary made yesterday. It is vital that we continue to strengthen our economic and defence relationship with India. However, the constituency case of Jagtar Singh Johal that the hon. Gentleman mentions was raised by the Foreign Secretary recently with her counterparts in India.

European Security

7. **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with her G7 counterparts on strengthening European security. [905926]

The Minister for Europe and North America (James Cleverly): The UK is working closely with our G7 partners to make clear our support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and that we will not accept Russia's campaign to subvert its democratic neighbours. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is working extensively with her G7 counterparts, and met with them in Brussels on 4 March to co-ordinate our response to Russian aggression, including robust economic measures and financial sanctions.

Andrew Jones: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the situation in Ukraine matters not just for European security, but for the whole world, and therefore we need a global response? Our global allies must join us in taking a tough stance on sanctions and strongly supporting the people of Ukraine. This attack on a democratic nation may have taken place on our continent, but it has significant global implications.

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed our potential sanctions response with G7 partners in Liverpool late last year, and he is absolutely right that the eyes of the world are watching our response on this, and the message we must send is clear: that the G7 and the wider international community, including countries in the far east, many miles from this conflict, are resolute in standing up against this kind of aggressive behaviour, and we will maintain that position.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome what the Minister has said about co-ordination with the G7 on Ukraine, but does he agree that Putin seeks to create instability and insecurity elsewhere in Europe at the same time, including in the

western Balkans, Moldova and the Caucasus. Can he tell us what he has been doing with G7 counterparts and our partners in the EU to address those attempts to create instability across the rest of Europe?

James Cleverly: The Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary met the Prime Ministers and representatives of the western Balkans just last week. The hon. Member is absolutely right that we must not allow the situation in Ukraine to have a destabilising effect on other parts of the continent or, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) said, other parts of the world. We will continue our close engagement with partners in the region and beyond to ensure that we deal with the situation in Ukraine and do not allow it to have a destabilising effect more broadly.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Now that the world has woken up to the reality of the cold-hearted ruthlessness of Putin's police state, does the Minister agree that the most important thing that members of the G7 that are also members of NATO can do to secure European security is to raise their defence budgets to levels that we used to spend when faced with this sort of confrontational approach from Russia?

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. The UK is rightly proud of the fact that we have consistently met out 2% of GDP target for NATO expenditure. We warmly welcome the recent commitment of the German Government in what is a politically bold and incredibly important move to increase their defence spending. This situation in Ukraine is a reminder that peace comes at a price, and we have to be willing to pay that price to maintain peace.

Topical Questions

T1. [905946] **Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): Putin's actions have shattered European security. In response, we have been at the forefront of providing support for Ukraine, stepping up sanctions to debilitate the Russian economy, which funds Putin's war machine, isolating Russia on the world stage, and strengthening NATO's eastern flank. We cannot have a world where might is right and sovereignty and territorial integrity are trampled. I am rallying our partners to boost support for Ukraine and strengthen our collective defence.

Barbara Keeley: There have been reports of several actions by Russian forces in Ukraine that violate the laws of armed conflict, including reports today of the shelling of a hospital in Mariupol. I join my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) in underlining how important it is to document these incidents, so that those responsible can eventually be held to account for their actions. Will the Government also do all they can to ensure the creation of a special tribunal to investigate the crime of aggression, because the Ukrainian people deserve justice?

Elizabeth Truss: I agree with the hon. Lady about the appalling atrocities that are taking place and the need to document those atrocities. That is why the UK with partners—38 states—put the referral to the International Criminal Court, and that is why we are working very hard with our partners to collect that important evidence.

T2. [905947] **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): Putin's Russia has been making aggressive statements towards Sweden and Finland. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the UK should be very supportive of their application to NATO, and we should look to expedite that, should they decide to apply?

The Minister for Europe and North America (James Cleverly): NATO has a strong partnership with Sweden and Finland. I assure my hon. Friend that our close co-ordination will continue. Our relationship with Sweden and Finland extends to our valued partnership in security and defence bilaterally and through regional groups, such as the joint expeditionary force and the northern group. I note closely what she said about future applications to join NATO from those states.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Minister Fabian Hamilton.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): Vladimir Putin's decision to severely restrict the BBC World Service in Russia is, I am sure all hon. Members agree, an attack on freedom of speech and on accurate, trustworthy, excellent journalism. The BBC has provided reliable information to the Russian people as Putin wages an illegal and unprovoked war, which he claims to do in their name. Will the Minister tell us what steps he is taking to ensure that the BBC World Service is not targeted further in Russia and across the rest of the world?

James Cleverly: The Government are firm in their defence of media freedom. The conflict in Ukraine has reminded us, if we needed reminding, how important the job of independent, honest journalism is internationally. The BBC World Service is a jewel in the British crown and the Russian language output that it provides is incredibly important in allowing Russians to understand what is being done perversely in their name.

T4. [905950] **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): Russia's invasion of Ukraine all too vividly demonstrates the dangers of autocratic regimes. Can my right hon. Friend assure the House that the UK actively supports the right of people to determine their own future wherever they are in the world, not least in Taiwan?

Elizabeth Truss: The world, including China, is watching how we and our partners respond to Russian aggression in Ukraine. The reality is that the only thing that Putin and Xi understand is strength, which is why it is so important that we bring more countries into the positive orbit of democratic, free enterprise and freedom-loving economies. That is what we are working to do with our partners in the G7 and more broadly.

T3. [905949] **Stephen Flynn** (Aberdeen South) (SNP): It was reported today that the UK Government regard Ukrainian refugees entering Ireland—women and bairns

fleeing Putin's bombs—as a security threat. When will the Government cut the hyperbole and the bureaucracy and give those poor souls sanctuary in this country?

James Cleverly: The Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary have made it absolutely clear that we will open our arms to Ukrainian refugees. The Home Office is working to ensure that that is done promptly and we will continue to support the Home Office in its work in that area.

T6. [905952] **Philip Dunne** (Ludlow) (Con): Putin has shown that he is prepared to attack nuclear power plants and has threatened to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the importance of maintaining the UK's strategic deterrent as a NATO asset is all the more vital in these dangerous times?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend is right about the reckless actions of President Putin and about the destabilisation and attempted destabilisation of nuclear facilities, which the United Kingdom called out at the UN Security Council. President Putin is trying to distract from his appalling invasion of Ukraine and the fact that it is not going according to plan by resorting to increased rhetoric. We simply should not respond to those threats.

T5. [905951] **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): The *Financial Times* reported today that UK taxpayers may be forced to foot a £43-million bill for loans taken out by Russia's biggest coal company and underwritten by the Government's export agency. I ask the Foreign Secretary whether she knows who the Secretary of State for International Trade was at the time that the deal was agreed with one of Russia's richest oligarchs and whether the Minister in question personally authorised the agreement?

Elizabeth Truss: I know from my time at the Department for International Trade that those agreements tend to be signed off by officials.

T7. [905953] **Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): Earlier, Ministers mentioned humanitarian corridors. What is being done to ensure that they are safe, secure and appropriate? What are the UK Government doing to uphold international humanitarian laws?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. As I said in response to an earlier question, Russia's farcical claim that it is opening humanitarian corridors eastwards is, of course, a nonsense. The Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion are typically doing so westwards into the countries bordering Ukraine. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has made the point that, in support of those people, the best thing the British people can do, wherever in the UK they are, is to make cash donations rather than donations in kind. We will ensure that that humanitarian support reaches the people it needs to, and we will continue supporting, both at the borders and here in the UK, those Ukrainian refugees as they flee conflict.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): Despite our deep and historic ties both with Israel and with the Arab world, the UK was entirely absent from the process

that led to the Abraham accords in the summer of 2020, and last year's integrated review made no mention of them whatsoever. Does the Minister agree that if the rhetoric of global Britain is to mean anything, surely the UK should be central to encouraging more of our partners across the Arab world to normalise relations with Israel for the good of the whole middle east?

The Minister for Asia and the Middle East (Amanda Milling): The Foreign Secretary made clear her commitment to the Abraham accords at the Gulf Co-operation Council and UK Foreign Ministers meeting on 20 December 2021. The UK warmly welcomes the historic steps taken to agree normalisation agreements between Israel, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Morocco and Sudan, and we will continue to work with the US and regional partners to actively encourage further dialogue between Israel and other countries in the region to work towards a more peaceful and prosperous future.

T8. [905954] **Dr Jamie Wallis** (Bridgend) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that to deter foreign states from sponsoring or launching cyber-attacks on the United Kingdom, now is the time, especially considering the recent Russian aggression, to show the world that Britain is willing and able to retaliate?

Elizabeth Truss: The UK remains vigilant to cyber-threats and we are ready to defend against them, working closely with our allies to deter, mitigate and attribute malicious cyber-activity. We are being very active in calling out the terrible cyber-activity by the Russian Government, and of course we will consider all levers of power to protect the UK's security.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): A year ago, the former Foreign Secretary commissioned an equalities impact assessment of the Government's aid cuts. We have been trying for almost that length of time to get the document into the public domain. Today is International Women's Day. Will the Foreign Secretary publish the report by 4 pm today?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady knows that, in the Budget we are doing this year, we are restoring the aid budget for women and girls back to its previous levels and we are also restoring the humanitarian aid budget. However, it is a matter of policy that we do not publicly release equality impact assessments because they have a chilling effect and people cannot be honest internally. That is why we do not release them, but of course I am very happy to discuss the issue with her further.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Tom Tugendhat.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for bringing us on to International Women's Day. Today is obviously an important day for celebrating the actions of so many courageous women around the world. Will my right hon. Friend speak today about those who have been made particular victims, those who have been chased out of their homes, the young women who have been sold into trafficking and not supported as refugees, and those women who are even now being brutalised in north Africa as they are forced over the border as slaves

into southern Europe? Will she please speak about the action that her Department is taking to defend those women and girls?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point about how many women and girls are suffering, and covid has made that situation worse. That is why we are restoring our humanitarian budget, why we are restoring the women and girls budget and why we are working on our preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative to stop that happening, as well as increasing the amount of development spending we are using to tackle human trafficking, working with the Home Office. We are working on our international development budget, and we will be announcing it fairly shortly, along with our overall humanitarian strategy.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I think the importance of the international events the House is dealing with this morning is a clear demonstration that the Department is not ultimately the right place for the protocol to be dealt with. In that vein, can I ask that the Secretary of State recognise the huge damage being done by the protocol? It is costing businesses in Northern Ireland £100,000 per hour. It has damaged the sovereignty of Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom. It is costing a 27% increase in haulage prices. Will the Secretary of State now set a deadline—an absolute deadline—to deal with this matter once and for all?

Elizabeth Truss: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I am dealing with this matter. I met various European countries last week to discuss reforming the Northern Ireland protocol, which simply is not working. Communities in Northern Ireland are being treated unfairly and there is an issue with getting goods from GB into Northern Ireland. We have put forward a concrete proposal that will also protect the EU single market and we need to see movement from the EU.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I have the honour of representing one of the largest Chagos islands communities anywhere in the world and the vast majority of them were absolutely appalled at the Mauritian Government's recent publicity stunt in planting a flag on the outer islands of their archipelago. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that we support the UK sovereignty of the British Indian Ocean Territory?

Amanda Milling: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and let me be absolutely clear that the UK is in no doubt about its sovereignty over BIOT. We were disappointed that Mauritius turned a scientific survey into a political stunt; the raising of Mauritian flags on outer islands of BIOT was an unhelpful way to approach a bilateral dispute. We removed the flags planted by Mauritius on BIOT. There certainly seems to be a range of reactions from Chagossians to this event; it is also very interesting to hear about my hon. Friend's constituents, and I pay tribute to him for all his work representing Chagossians living in Crawley.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Minister is cautioning against donations in kind to Ukraine because of the red tape our exports are tied up in as a result of the Brexit deal; I know that for a fact because I have explored it on behalf of a number of charities in my constituency. What action will the

Department take to talk to EU counterparts and ensure the flow of humanitarian aid to Ukraine, given the complexity of sending second-hand goods and so forth abroad now?

Elizabeth Truss: What the hon. and learned Lady said is simply not true. The Polish Government, who the hon. and learned Lady should be listening to—and she should take responsibility here—have said that donations in kind generates

“disproportional amounts of additional work and cost, which proves ineffective and counterproductive”.

With all due respect to the hon. and learned Lady, I think the Polish Government know more about the situation on the border with Ukraine than she does.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): What discussions are the Government having with our overseas territories and Crown dependencies to ensure that the measures we are taking on illicit finance are being supported by them—that those same rules are being introduced in their own territories as well?

Amanda Milling: The UK and the overseas territories stand united in condemning the Russian Government. The UK sanctions regimes apply to all overseas territories, which are completely in step with the UK and our international allies in implementing sanctions against Russia.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): We know that the National Crime Agency is underpowered, but we also know we have a common interest with our European allies in the search for credible information about those oligarchs who should be sanctioned, so what steps are being taken to internationalise this search process to make sure we sanction those who should be sanctioned?

Elizabeth Truss: We are working with our international partners. I attended a meeting of the EU Foreign Affairs Council along with the US and Canada. We are talking about enforcement and are sharing lists and information to make sure our crime agencies are able to tackle this illicit activity.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): Yesterday, the Foreign Secretary said that one of the things that pained her the most was the sale of embassy buildings over many years and she hoped no more of it would happen on her watch. Will she cancel the proposed sale of 45% of our Tokyo embassy estate, which would deeply dishearten one of our closest allies at a time when we are seeking to strengthen the western alliance?

Elizabeth Truss: I share my right hon. Friend's deep attachment to our Tokyo facilities and am working very hard with our officials on what we can do to make sure we retain our terrific presence, which is just over the road from the Imperial Palace in Tokyo, and any help my right hon. Friend would like to give me as chairman of the all-party group on Japan would be very welcome, including financial assistance and help with the Treasury.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What representations has the Minister made to our counterparts in Kazakhstan on the security forces' use of force on people protesting against living standards and on the oppression of peaceful protest?

James Cleverly: Following the outbreak of violence in Kazakhstan, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad met senior representatives of the Kazakh Government, including President Tokayev's special representative. In those contacts, he underlined the need to ensure that law enforcement responses are proportionate and in accordance with Kazakhstan's international obligations. He also stressed the importance of conducting the investigation into the unrest urgently, transparently and effectively.

Mr Speaker: I call Laurence Robertson to ask the final question.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): While the world rightly focuses on the terrible events in Ukraine, I remind the House of the terrible ongoing conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, where women in particular are suffering the most terrible attacks and there is also a potential famine. I know that the Minister is taking a deep interest in that, but can the Government do any more to help?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford): I thank my hon. Friend for continuing to shine a light on the terrible situation in Ethiopia. It is the world's most severe humanitarian crisis. From north to south, 30 million people require life-saving aid, 5 million people have been displaced because of conflict and tens of millions of people are affected by the drought. Again, I urge all parties in the north of the country to lay down their arms and facilitate humanitarian access. Since December, one truck has got through, but 100 a day are needed. There is a high-scale risk of loss of life. We must continue to stand with the people of Ethiopia and, as my hon. Friend says, especially the women and girls on International Women's Day.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Following the Foreign Secretary's answer to me about the FCDO's equalities impact assessment conducted in March 2021, I seek your advice on any other way to encourage her to fulfil her duty to the House, as is stated in the ministerial code, to be

“held to account, for...policies, decisions and actions”,

to be

“as open as possible with Parliament”

and to refuse to provide information

“only when disclosure would not be in the public interest”.

The Foreign Secretary said that the Government's practice is not to formally publish equalities assessments and has added her view that that would have a “chilling effect” on the advice prepared by officials. However, that is confusing as a range of equalities impact assessments have been published in the past, such as for the Coronavirus Bill, and no one will be surprised that the former Department for International Development commissioned independent reviews of its assessment work and that the Independent Commission for Aid Impact also examined such issues. It is fundamentally deplorable that the Foreign

Secretary has used the assessment to celebrate her Department but will not put the information into the public domain.

Mr Speaker: It is very important that scrutiny Committees have access to relevant papers and records to do the job that the House has delegated to them. The International

Development Committee is best placed to assess what information is needed for its inquiries, and I trust that Members on the Government Front Bench have heard the hon. Member's concerns and will respond to the Committee's request in a timely manner and provide the papers.

Ukraine: Urgent Refugee Applications

12.38 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on how her Department can speed up the urgent refugee applications coming from those leaving Ukraine.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): President Putin's invasion of Ukraine is a barbaric and unprovoked attack and we stand shoulder to shoulder with the Ukrainian people. He must fail in Ukraine.

This Government have brought forward a generous humanitarian offer to those Ukrainians who want to come to the UK to escape the conflict. Last week, the Home Secretary announced a new Ukraine family scheme for those with family ties to the UK, and we are extending the scheme further to include aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, cousins and in-laws. The scheme went live last Friday and has already seen over 10,000 applications submitted, for which over 500 visas have been issued, with more being issued as we speak. We have also announced that we are setting up a new humanitarian sponsorship visa, and we are working at pace with our colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to set that up. We will also work with the devolved Administrations.

We have made significant progress in a short space of time, on top of the first phase of the package that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary set out to the House last week. I also remind the House that a crucial part of the application process is providing biometrics so that we can be sure that applicants are who they say they are. Sadly, we are already seeing people presenting at Calais with false documents claiming to be Ukrainian. With incidents like Salisbury still in our minds, the Government will not take chances with the security of this country and our people. Our friends in the United States, Canada and Australia are rightly taking the same approach as we are.

I would like to update the House on the measures that we are taking to speed up and process the applications and to ensure that we can help applicants as quickly as possible. We have surged staff to key visa application centres across Europe, particularly in Poland, and moved more biometric kit to support them. We have ensured that casework teams are standing by in the UK to process applications to ensure that there are no delays.

We will also establish a larger presence in northern France to help Ukrainians in the region. It is essential that we do not create a choke point at places like Calais, where dangerous people smugglers are present, and ensure the smooth flow of people through the system from across Europe. Alongside that, we are working with our embassies around the world to ensure that we use our diplomatic channels to support our efforts and to provide the latest information.

We have taken decisive action. We are now providing regular public updates on our casework numbers and we will continue to keep the House updated on this progress.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I thank my hon. Friend for that comprehensive answer. It is very impressive that the Prime Minister and this Government have taken such a world-leading role, uniting the west in imposing one of the toughest sanctions regimes and providing military support for Ukraine.

However, the UK has always been generous in admitting refugees, especially in times of crisis in Europe, dating back to the Huguenots. Concerned constituents have contacted me, so will my hon. Friend tell the House how we can speed up the necessary processing of refugees leaving the truly awful situation in Ukraine? Will he also update the House on what is happening in Calais, so that they can be processed either there or close by with transport provided?

I understand that we require a process to securely check applications that are made not only for security reasons, but so that we can provide support in this country. However, we surely could speed the process up by, for example, rewashing biometric and other data that we already have. We need not only efficiency, but humanity when processing applications of refugees from Ukraine and we should warmly welcome those refugees to this country.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for the way in which he put his questions. He is right that we as a country have stood forward to support Ukraine, not least in supplying it with the weaponry that is being used to defend people's homes and to push back this barbaric and unprovoked attack on their nation.

I appreciate that there are concerns. We are training new caseworkers, who, as of tomorrow, will take more decisions. We are looking to review what we can and to use some of the technology that we have—for example, around what we deployed for the British nationals overseas route and how that could be brought into effect. We are also reviewing some of the requirements on biometrics for under-18s to free up visa appointments in visa application centres.

On my hon. Friend's specific points on northern France, we are looking to establish a presence in Lille and potentially looking at transport options from Calais to Lille. There are issues with providing particular application points at the port, but we are looking at how we can do it, and we expect that to be set up within the next 24 hours.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): It is deeply disappointing that the Home Secretary is not here to respond, given the gravity of the issue—especially after she gave wrong information to the House several times yesterday.

Two million refugees have left Ukraine. Other countries are supporting hundreds of thousands of people; the Home Office is currently issuing about 250 family scheme visas a day. Most people want to stay close to home, but some want to come here to join family or friends, and we should be helping them. Instead, most people are still being held up by Home Office bureaucracy or are being turned away.

Yesterday, the Home Secretary told the House twice that a visa centre en route to Calais had been set up, but it still does not exist. The Foreign Secretary has just said that it might be in Lille, nearly 75 miles from Calais. The

Home Office said this morning that no decision had been taken. Which is it? Has it? Where is it? Can people get there yet?

The Home Secretary said yesterday:

“It is wrong to say that we are just turning people back”.—[*Official Report*, 7 March 2022; Vol. 710, c. 27.]

But there are 600 people in Calais right now who have been turned back and are being told to go to Brussels, where the visa centre is open only three days a week, or to Paris, where people are still being told that the next appointment is on 15 March, a week away. In Warsaw, people are also still being told that the next appointment is on 15 March, a week away. In Rzeszów, the booking system seems to have completely broken down: this morning, they are sending people away.

The Home Office was warned by the chief inspector in November that the geographical spread of visa application centres was a real problem for vulnerable applicants, leading to difficult journeys, yet it did nothing about it, even when it was given weeks of warning by British intelligence that an invasion was coming.

Yesterday, the Home Secretary told me that elderly aunts were covered by the scheme. Two hours later, the Home Office helpline said that they were not. I welcome the inclusion of extended relatives, but the Government should not be continuing to change the system in a chaotic way, rather than opening it properly. Will the Government urgently set up emergency visa centres at all major travel points, do the security checks on the spot and then issue emergency visas for Ukrainians—for all family, but not just family—so that they can come here and the UK can do our historic bit to help refugees fleeing war in Europe, as we have done before?

Kevin Foster: The answer to the right hon. Lady's points about setting up a facility in northern France was in the comments that I have just made about Lille and about setting it up in the next 24 hours.

On the numbers that the right hon. Lady cites, we are training more decision makers as we speak. We are pulling people in from across UK Visas and Immigration to ensure that there is an almost frictionless approach to caseworking, and we will see the number of visas issued ramping up each day.

But this is a complex scenario. As I touched on in my statement, we have seen people presenting themselves at Calais port pretending to be Ukrainian. [*Interruption.*] I appreciate that some Opposition Members may think that that is not an issue, but we need only look at some of the statements coming out of the Kremlin to see which countries are very much in the crosshairs of Mr Putin's Russia and his regime. We only have to look back a short period to see the impact in this country of attacks by those pretending that they had come here to look at a cathedral spire.

We will move out to extend this. We recognise the desperate plight that there is; that is why we are working with countries on the ground, providing humanitarian aid and ensuring that we are helping to provide support as people cross borders. We are looking to ensure that we have a wide system that allows people to come here, and abandoning many of our normal requirements for countries. We recognise that it is not a time for the usual immigration process, hence the system that we are setting up. As we have said, we have the confidence that it will

expand. We know that the British people will be generous. We know that when we move to open up the sponsorship visa, many people, including many of our constituents, will want to step forward.

I will just say that if we look at the surveys being done in Ukraine about which countries people feel are most on their side, it is notable which one regularly comes top.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I am sorry that the Home Secretary is not here today to answer our questions. In response to my question yesterday, she said:

“I have already made it clear, in terms of the visa application centre that has now been set up en route to Calais, that we have staff in Calais”.—[*Official Report*, 7 March 2022; Vol. 710, c. 28.]

That was untrue, and under any normal Administration that in itself would be a resignation issue. There is no visa centre at Lille yet, although earlier this morning the Foreign Secretary said that there was.

A week ago, the Home Secretary announced the introduction of a humanitarian sponsorship visa. There is as yet no humanitarian sponsorship visa. It is time that the Home Office granted a visa waiver, and allowed children and all adults with Ukrainian passports to come into the country now.

Kevin Foster: I understand that the Home Secretary clarified her remarks yesterday, and I have been clear about the position regarding the centre that we are establishing.

I do hear the appeal that has been made, but there is a reason why we believe it is right that key security checks are carried out before people arrive in the United Kingdom. We are, however, reviewing the specific position on the provision of biometrics by those aged under 18. We will act on the basis of risk and advice that we receive, including advice from our security services. We are a country that is in Mr Putin's crosshairs, we are a country that has stood resolutely behind the Ukrainian Government and continues to do so, and we are a country that will welcome literally thousands of people in what is probably one of the biggest moves to provide shelter and refuge for a generation.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson, Stuart C. McDonald.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I agree with the right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale): it is time to stop messing about with the broken bureaucracy and to scrap it altogether, with no more visas required. That is how we can quickly fulfil our obligations to the people of Ukraine. Our European allies can do it safely and securely, so why cannot the Home Secretary? There are other ways to address our security concerns after the arrival of refugees, such as what we do with non-visa nationals and what we did with evacuated Afghans. The Minister should not quote Salisbury at us, because that has nothing whatever to do with this situation.

How does the Minister justify all the other massive restrictions on who can come here? Why can a cousin not join a cousin? Why do no non-family ties count at all? Crucially, why is it that many thousands of Ukrainians in this country—whether skilled workers, agricultural

[Stuart C. McDonald]

workers or students—cannot be joined by anyone under the family rules, just because they do not have permanent residence yet? People cannot wait months for possible community sponsorship.

Finally, let me ask this question again: does not the last fortnight illustrate just how ill-conceived the disgraceful Nationality and Borders Bill is? Under the Bill, a Ukrainian fleeing here to join a cousin or friend could be criminalised, offshored, imprisoned—all because there is no visa for them. That is utterly indefensible, is it not?

Kevin Foster: Having been closely involved in the evacuation from Kabul, along with colleagues in the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, I would remind the hon. Gentleman that we did carry out security checks on people who were leaving what was a very different and very dynamic environment, especially given the obvious threat, so the suggestion that we did not carry out any checks before that evacuation is not correct.

As for the launch of the sponsorship scheme, we do not see that taking months, as the hon. Gentleman suggested. We are already seeing people coming forward with generous offers of homes, jobs and wider support. A hotel in my constituency with a Ukrainian speaker is starting to look at the possibility of offering jobs and accommodation. As the hon. Gentleman knows, last week I had a helpful and productive conversation with the relevant Scottish Government Minister, and, to be fair, I know that the Scottish Government will also step up and do what they can.

The hon. Gentleman said that it was not appropriate to use the Salisbury example, but we do need to remember why we have these checks in place. It is because, as we have already seen at Calais, there are people presenting with false documents, and there are people making claims that are not true. However, I recognise that the House wants to see us getting on with processing, putting more people on to this work, and ensuring that we can, as quickly as possible, provide for a very large number of people to move into the UK. As I have said, this one of our biggest moves to provide sanctuary for a generation.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me say to Members, so that they can help each other, that these exchanges will run until about 1.40 pm, so the shorter the questions and answers, the better it will be.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Snails also move “at pace”. No date has yet been set for a humanitarian sponsorship visa scheme, and as a result people who are coming forward with generous offers are advising their Ukrainian friends to apply for visitors’ visas. But what of those who do not have passports? What of children who are completely undocumented? When my hon. Friend the Minister says that he is moving at pace, he should bear in mind that the pace needs to be a great deal faster.

Kevin Foster: It is possible for children and others to travel to the UK without a passport if permission has been granted. As a former Immigration Minister, my right hon. Friend will be familiar with that process. As

for where we are at present, we are making sure that the process is being stepped up. We have extended the provisions, and of course the sponsorship route will provide a whole new opportunity for people to extend a generous offer and the hand of friendship to those who need sanctuary in the UK.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, Dame Diana Johnson.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am grateful for the granting of the urgent question, but I think that a statement from the Home Office would have been a much better way of dealing with the confusion of recent days.

I believe we are united in the House in wanting to do the right thing for the Ukrainian people who are fleeing in fear of their lives, and to offer protection and sanctuary. The Home Affairs Committee has twice invited the Minister to come and explain how the Home Office is dealing with this. He has agreed to come next week and we are grateful for that, but we should not have to ask twice.

I want to ask the Minister why, on Sunday, the Home Secretary went on record to tell journalists:

“I am...investigating the legal options to create a humanitarian route.

This means anyone without ties to the UK fleeing the conflict in Ukraine will have a right to come to this nation.”

On Monday, Ministers seemed to have no idea about that. Can the Minister update us? Is this matter under consideration in the Home Office, given that there is clearly a great deal of support for the granting of a humanitarian visa?

Kevin Foster: As the right hon. Lady will know from my original letter to her, we felt that pulling officials away to do a session before the Home Affairs Committee tomorrow would have meant pulling them—and me—away from the preparations for bringing people to the UK. However, we also specifically said that we would seek to agree on a later date, and that could, perhaps, have been reflected in the statement issued on Friday.

Let me deal with the right hon. Lady’s more substantive points. We have the existing process for those who have relatives here, and we are extending it well beyond the normal relatives and dependants. Moreover, the wider sponsorship route will provide many other opportunities for people to come to the UK.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the Minister agree that most of the help with processing visas should be provided close to the Ukrainian border? What are the Government doing to increase processing there—in particular, in the small country of Moldova, which has taken more than 80,000 Ukrainians? Have we a presence there, and how open is that visa centre?

Kevin Foster: We do have visa application centres in the countries bordering Ukraine, and we have stepped up capacity there, particularly in countries that are in the European economic area. Normally a very small number of EEA nationals need to go to a visa application centre, so we have been bringing in resources from other areas to bolster those centres. There is, in fact, a centre in Moldova. I understand that it has moved to seven-day working, although obviously demand will be very high,

and people can apply from any visa application centre where they can get an appointment; they do not need to be in a country immediately bordering Ukraine. As I have said, we continue to expand capacity, and we are considering the position relating to those under 18 and whether they need to provide biometrics.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I think the House would be more impressed by the Minister's security concerns had his initial response not been to tweet, "Let them pick fruit." He speaks about complex scenarios. Is he not even a little embarrassed that the United Kingdom, uniquely in Europe, seems to be finding it too difficult to tackle those complex scenarios?

Kevin Foster: Again, I would make the point that we have stepped up a system that will grant three years of leave, giving people more permanent status here in the UK and the security to move forward. As we have always said, there is a range of routes available. It should come as no surprise that those countries that are least popular with the Putin regime—ourselves, the US, Canada and Australia—are taking similar approaches.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): The breadth of support that the UK Government are offering to Ukraine is fantastic, as is recognised by Ukrainians. It is shocking to hear the Opposition jeering at the prospect of the Government trying to protect the UK people from further such attacks as took place in Salisbury. Nevertheless, I agree with colleagues who are concerned about the speed of processing of these visas. In particular, in my own constituency I have someone whose sister-in-law is stuck in Ukraine and someone else whose aunt is stuck there. Can my hon. Friend give us an update on what exactly we are doing to facilitate family reunification?

Kevin Foster: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. I would make the point that people do not need to wait in Ukraine if they are thinking of applying for the humanitarian family visa and if they are able to travel safely across Ukraine. We all recognise the reality of the barbaric approach that some Russian forces are taking to civilians. It is clear that there are regular breaches of international law and that war crimes are being committed, so there is a real issue about whether people can genuinely travel safely across Ukraine, but if they wish to, they can travel to a safe and democratic country across the border and make their application from there. As I have said, we have extended the definition, and we are rapidly expanding the caseworking teams to ensure that we can get through the applications and get people here so that they can be with their relatives in the UK.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Does the Minister understand how poorly it reflects on this country that our system for processing Ukrainian refugees is so slow and shambolic? Even accepting the need for biometric tests and so on, why can they not be done on the spot? Why can this not be expedited so that these desperate people can come and join their families here in the UK?

Kevin Foster: Across the world, people are reflecting on the immense support that the United Kingdom and this Government have provided to the people of Ukraine.

That is reflected quite regularly in comments by those who are in Ukraine. We are looking to speed up the process but it is important to carry out essential security checks for the reasons we have outlined.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I hate to harp on about the phrase "at pace", but can the Minister give some indication whether it will be weeks or months before the humanitarian sponsorship route is open? Separately, I take his point about security and the need for biometric checks, but I do not understand why those checks cannot be done in this country once we have got the people here safe and sound.

Kevin Foster: Those who are applying are actually in safe countries as we speak. As I have said, there is no requirement for people to stay in Ukraine to make an application if they can safely make their way across the border to one of the safe and democratic countries next door that we are supporting to provide support for those crossing the border. My right hon. Friend will know from his own experience that, for a range of reasons, if we bring people into the country we perform checks, but we certainly do not want to go down the route of using immigration detention powers while these checks are being undertaken. We do not believe that that would be appropriate at all.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): One visa centre in Poland has closed its doors and is no longer allowing walk-in appointments. It is 3° outside, and there is an 81-year-old woman outside, along with other women and children. There is plenty of room inside but the centre will not open its doors. This is complete chaos, and it is unacceptable. What is the Minister going to do about it?

Kevin Foster: I am happy to look at the particular example that the hon. Gentleman has cited, but we are surging staff and resource and we are conscious of the position there and of how we can increase capacity to ensure that we can get as many people in as possible. In particular, I have already touched on looking at whether children need to give biometrics. We will be guided on that by the security advice that we receive. That will mean that there will be large numbers of extra appointments, plus a cohort that will not need to submit biometrics.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): One way we can rapidly scale up capacity is to use technology. What is my hon. Friend's view of the ability of Ukrainians with biometric passports to use the UK Immigration: ID Check app, which does apply and has been used by many applications from Hong Kong? May I commend that course of action to him?

Kevin Foster: We are looking at adapting the AUK2 app for Hong Kong special administrative region—HKSAR—passports as well as for British national overseas passports. Adapting it for BNO passports was relatively easy; HKSAR passports were slightly more complex. This is something we have been looking at, although it does bring certain challenges to ensure that passports can be read and that the process goes through appropriately, but it is something that we are actively considering because it would allow us to issue e-visas.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): From offers by individual constituents and the Welsh Government's action in talking to Cardiff airport about welcoming refugees there, we can see support from the British people who are very keen to welcome Ukrainian refugees. However, I am immensely embarrassed that, while other countries across Europe have been welcoming them with open arms for three years without any questions about being part of particular family, the Minister is so determined that we should not have a broader and more welcoming system for all Ukrainians to come here.

Kevin Foster: I would point to the sponsorship system that will be set up, which will be open pretty much to many and all Ukrainians, although I remind the House that the vast majority of people understandably want to remain in the region. They will want to go home after the invader has been defeated and expelled from their country. The idea that all Ukrainians are looking to move elsewhere is not correct, but the sponsorship scheme will allow a wide and generous offer and we very much look forward to seeing offers to sponsor people coming forward from across Wales.

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): The Minister has talked about training new decision-makers. How many are being trained today? What discussions have taken place with retired decision-makers and caseworkers, and what discussions have happened across Government with other people who are used to making decisions on behalf of Her Majesty's Government, to assess how they could assist with this issue?

Kevin Foster: I thank my right hon. Friend for his thoughtful question. We have 50 in training today, and we are bringing the whole of UK Visas and Immigration's quite significant resource to bear on this. In the first instance, we will take decision-makers off other immigration routes, because they will be familiar with immigration decisions and will therefore be more likely to take immigration decisions more quickly in this area. We are also talking to other Government Departments about apprentices and others who can potentially backfill other parts of the immigration system. UKVI employs thousands of decision-makers and we are looking across the piece at those with experience that we can deploy in this area and then potentially backfill other parts with those from other Departments.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I have a list here of everything my constituent has done to get his Ukrainian wife into this country. He started with an application on 12 February. They lost his family in the system. I have spoken to the Minister and I have been to the hub. Today my constituent emailed me four times to say that he was in Rzeszów, that the transport layer security—TLS—system was broken, that his appointment had not been registered and that there was no guarantee he would be seen. The final email said that he had been advised to leave the visa application centre, which had managed to process only seven people and was down from two clerks to one. He has been advised to go to the embassy in Warsaw. He needs biometrics, because nobody will look at him until he has them, but he is a UK national and all he wants is to get his wife and daughters back to Wishaw. Help!

Kevin Foster: The hon. Lady will realise that it would not be appropriate for me to go into the detail of individual cases on the Floor of the House, but I am very happy to speak to her afterwards to see what we can do to resolve the situation.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): As a former Immigration Minister, I am very sympathetic to the need to do appropriate security checks. I have publicly defended the Government on this issue, but we need to grip the pace of this, which will require Ministers to take decisions to move things along quickly.

The Home Secretary announced the humanitarian sponsorship route a week ago. I heard what my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) said about weeks or months, but I was thinking about days. I expect a Minister to be at the Dispatch Box by Thursday to set it out. We have to start working at the pace these events require, so will the Minister commit to an update on the humanitarian sponsorship scheme on Thursday?

Kevin Foster: The Government will be happy to update Members on Thursday on what is happening, whether through a "Dear colleague" letter or another appropriate forum. We intend that it will be weeks, not months, before we start welcoming people into the UK. This will be an unlimited offer that reflects people's generosity, but I appreciate that we now need to get on and get it launched.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I have been in the Chamber since the start of business, and it is not often that I feel ashamed. I have listened to a range of Ministers make half-baked excuses for no action. The President of Ukraine will be speaking to us later, and this is when our hearts, minds and prayers are with the people of Ukraine. For God's sake, will the ministerial team and the Government please get their act together and open the doors to these poor people?

Kevin Foster: We look forward to hearing the President later, and we reflect on how he has inspired his people in resisting the invasion, including with the arms we have supplied. We are, as we have outlined, surging decision makers, upping the capacity of VAC and considering whether under-18s should continue submitting biometrics, which would not only speed up their applications but free up appointments for others. We are moving caseworking resource from across UKVI to get through the applications, and we will continue to take further action to speed up the process. I hear what the House is saying.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I thank the officials in the Portcullis House hub who are providing helpful advice to constituents.

We have been advised to get people to Rzeszów in Poland for biometric testing to support their application, but the word on the ground is that there are no biometric appointments in Rzeszów until the end of next month. When constituents' families are sent to these posts for biometric testing, can the Minister confirm that the testing will actually be available?

Kevin Foster: I am concerned about that example. We will continue to look to increase biometric capacity. As I said, we are actively considering removing the need for biometric testing for under-18s and whether we can

adapt the technology we used for Hong Kong BNOs who do not need to go to a VAC as part of their application, which would innately create further capacity for people to come through the system. We will continue to look at how we can surge and increase the capacity of our application centres across the region, not just the one that has been cited.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): My constituents in Vauxhall want to see the UK make it clear that refugees are welcome. We need a clear and simple process in place for people seeking asylum, but vulnerable people need support before they get to the border. There are urgent humanitarian problems, including access to food, transportation, sanitation and hygiene facilities, mental health services, bereavement support and emergency healthcare, including for people living with HIV. Will the Minister please ensure that the UK's asylum system begins with immediate aid for people who need to flee?

Kevin Foster: The hon. Lady makes some strong points. One of the reasons we are working closely with the countries bordering Ukraine is that, given the end of direct travel, it is extremely unlikely that people will make it to the UK in a day. Those who have just crossed the border from Ukraine will need a range of support, including medical support, and colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care are talking with the Polish health authorities because Poland's hospitals are clearly beginning to become fairly full. We will need to look across western Europe for others to support them, including by potentially taking patients from those hospitals into the UK. I make it clear that people who enter our asylum system will arrive with status and will be able to get on with their life. They will not have to make a further application here.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Salisbury borders my constituency, so I fully accept the need for security checks, particularly on adult males. But the fact remains that the Republic of Ireland, with which we share a common travel area, has a population of 5 million and has committed to take 100,000 refugees from Ukraine, having already admitted more than 2,000. This country, with a population of 67 million, has come nowhere close to that. Why not?

Kevin Foster: First, looking at what we are doing, we estimate that about 100,000 people are potentially eligible for the family route, and we have an unlimited position on the sponsorship route, which could well see us exceed quite significantly the numbers offered by the Republic of Ireland.

Visas are now going out. As I said, nearly 500 had been granted as of 9.30 this morning, and more are being granted as we speak. We are surging decision-making capability and upping the biometrics process, which will quickly increase the numbers arriving in the United Kingdom, on top of the numbers we have already welcomed as we moved UK nationals and their families earlier this year.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): My constituent Michael Jevdokymenko has been contacted by his family, who have fled from Ukraine. They have no documents, no papers—nothing. They are at the border with a little three-year-old child. What assistance can we provide to

give that family hope, to get them to Northern Ireland and to let them re-establish some semblance of normality? Where is the Christian compassion for which this nation was known?

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that example. We are conscious that people are leaving without the normal proof they might have of family relationships. It would clearly be inappropriate to insist that people try to get a marriage certificate or something like that if they have fled from their home. We have provisions that allow travel without passports and other documents, obviously once certain checks and nominations are done. Again, that is part of the process that is being established.

We are conscious that, even where people have access to documents, they might not have the full documents. We are also conscious that people will potentially have left in a hurry, so they may not have had time to bring particular documents. Not having a passport will not be a bar, but we will need to use other processes to identify them, which is not unusual in situations where we are moving people at pace.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): So much about this does not feel right, and my constituents know what they see. All of this is far too robotic. As the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) said, very little Christian compassion is being shown at the moment. Surely we are past the UK saying that we are going to have a generous scheme; it is time to deliver a generous scheme.

The family scheme is too slow and the humanitarian sponsorship scheme, as I raised with the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities yesterday, is still being designed at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. I do not want to hear the Minister say that that is another Department, as he is the Minister at the Dispatch Box. At the very least, can we have a simple online gateway up and running tomorrow so that constituents who want to help can at least register their interest? There is so much compassion and desire to help, but people are not able to do so.

Kevin Foster: I recognise my hon. Friend's concern. The vast majority of councils in this country, including my own, took part in the Afghan resettlement scheme, and many are already offering to take details and offers of help in preparation for the launch of the humanitarian sponsorship route. I encourage my constituents to do it, and I know he will be encouraging his constituents to think of what offers they can make. The compassion of this country is shown by the fact this will be an unlimited scheme, on top of the family scheme, and could potentially be one of the biggest movements into communities in the UK since the evacuations of the 1930s.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his personal help, but my constituents share the absolute frustration at the speed at which the Government are moving on this issue. Can he get a grip on the situation in Warsaw? I heard today of people who are seeking to join their family in the UK but who are being told that there are no appointments available until at least 15 March, even though they have been in Poland for some time having escaped Kyiv. Will he publish how many staff have actually been posted to Warsaw, Bucharest, Budapest,

[Stephen Doughty]

Bratislava and Chisinau? Have we actually sent staff? Are all of them operating at seven-day capacity? How long do people have to wait for appointments in those locations?

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his points. We are surging staff into our visa applications centres; I am conscious of the fact that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office also has a separate system of posts and diplomatic presence there. We are looking at how we can expand the capacities, and I have touched on some other things we are looking at in order to remove the need for a biometric appointment entirely.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Yet again, we see the Home Office refusing to grasp the urgency of this crisis. Just like the Afghan resettlement scheme, these schemes are too limited and progress is too slow. My constituents are desperate to help and are offering their homes, but no sponsorship information is available. The Welsh Government are offering to help, as are Welsh local authorities. What discussions has the Minister had with them to facilitate this scheme? What estimate does he have of the number of sponsorships available in Wales?

Kevin Foster: On engagement with the Welsh Government, I understand that colleagues in the Department that lead on this have spoken to the Welsh and Scottish Governments about the provisions. Of course this will depend on how many sponsors come forward and how many people want to be part of welcoming people into their own homes and own community across Wales—I suspect we will see a generous amount. On urgency, we took 16,000 people out of Kabul in two weeks, we worked at pace and we are still evacuating people out of Afghanistan as we speak. We will soon be welcoming many thousands from Ukraine into the UK, alongside having the most generous sponsorship scheme that exists, given that it is completely uncapped.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Many of the Ukrainian refugees who eventually get here will be vulnerable women and children, not all of whom will have relatives here who can offer a roof over their heads. Have the Government given any thought to setting up some sort of portal or clearing house where offers of accommodation can be made and basic safety checks can also be made before vulnerable people take up those offers?

Kevin Foster: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. We are talking about potentially vulnerable individuals arriving in a cohort, and we will need to make sure that basic safeguarding checks are in place, particularly where people are offering to welcome people into their homes. I know that my colleagues are closely looking at how that can be done, but without it becoming a barrier to enabling the swift movement of this scheme.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): A refugee is a refugee, regardless of the colour of their skin or their background. So I am deeply concerned about reports of refugees from a BAME background being stopped at

the Ukrainian border and turned away. Does the Minister agree that such reports are despicable? What are the Government doing to ensure the safe passage of all refugees fleeing from this horrific conflict?

Kevin Foster: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the fact that Ukraine provided a safe haven for people leaving Afghanistan. It is not just one community living in Ukraine; like our own country, it is a set of ideals as a nation and it is not based on a particular ethnicity. It would be concerning to hear that people are being turned away at the Ukrainian border. Obviously, we do not control that border, as he will appreciate. There is also Ukrainian law to consider in relation to men aged 18 to 60, who are required to stay in Ukraine for military service, including dual nationals. Again, that is a decision taken by Ukraine. However, we would certainly be clear that race and ethnicity should not play any part in the decisions taken at that border on allowing people to leave Ukraine and enter safe and democratic countries next door, and then potentially move on to the UK via our schemes.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I appreciate that Ministers and officials are grappling with a horrendously complex situation, but it is worrying that some contradictory advice has been offered to Members. I have a constituent who has pre-settled status and I was told by the Members' help desk on Thursday that she would be able to bring her two young children across. Yesterday, she emailed to say that, no, the published advice was against that. I went back to the help desk, where they said they were going to escalate the query. I am escalating it even further, to the Minister: does this lady with pre-settled status have the ability to bring her two young children into the UK?

Kevin Foster: This is probably one I may wish to take away and look at, in respect of the rules around the EU settlement scheme, particularly if this lady was here with pre-settled status during the time of free movement, because some particular rules apply to those people—again, they are free-of-charge application routes. I would certainly be happy to take that one away and get confirmation.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The Minister may be interested to know—I am very surprised he has not already mentioned this—that Citizens UK has set up a registration link for communities and individuals who want to register their interest in community sponsorship. Community sponsorship is a route by which people can come to the UK only if a scheme exists to which communities can apply. The delay in setting up the Afghan scheme was a disgrace, so will the Minister say when we will have a scheme? Community sponsorship is a lengthy process and it can take up to a year before a community group can be matched with a family to come here, so will he say what will be different about this scheme that will make it fit for purpose to meet the urgency of this crisis?

Kevin Foster: I recognise that a number of groups are encouraging people to register to help, and I welcome that—again, once the official scheme moves forward, that will be a welcome source of information. On community sponsorship, the hon. Lady rightly highlights some of the issue. On a wider point, we have announced that we are going to look at that, as we do think

community sponsorship takes too long and too many barriers can be thrown in the way of it. On this scheme, our intention is for a minimised process that does not involve things such as local authority consent and some of the things we see in community sponsorship. This is much simplified and is about matching up those who are prepared to make a particular offer of accommodation and support, and those who are able to take that up, subject, as the hon. Lady would expect, to some of the safeguarding issues that I have touched on already.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): It is wholly appropriate to recognise the breadth and scale of support that the Government have given, as well as the significant steps that the Minister and his colleagues have taken. But we also need to recognise and understand the desperate plight of people fleeing such persecution and the risks they face. My constituent Yuri Nobles has returned to Ukraine to bring family members back but is struggling to get an appointment, like so many others here. In recognising the challenge the Minister faces and the challenge from the constituent, may I ask what consideration the Minister has given to extending expired biometric assessments, which can easily be extended to be made appropriate now?

Kevin Foster: As I touched on partly in my reference to the system that was used for British nationals overseas, we are looking at what role could be played by previously submitted biometrics and at those who have previously had visas to the UK in the recent past who possess a biometric passport. As this stage, we are conscious that where we can reduce the numbers who need to go to a visa application centre, it will free up capacity. As I say, however, our first thoughts have been looking at the requirements for those under 18 and we are looking at the final security advice on doing that.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Using the risk from Kremlin operatives—who have rather easier ways of reaching this country than by posing as refugees—as an excuse for this mean-spirited and shambolic approach simply will not do. Until the Minister follows the advice of the right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), are he and his fellow Ministers not going to have to keep coming back to this House to explain this shambles? Just do what the right hon. Gentleman suggested, and what the whole of the rest of Europe is doing, and offer visa-free entry for a limited period to Ukrainian refugees.

Kevin Foster: As I have outlined, there are clear reasons why we are doing this and we do believe it is right. Basic security checks are made for people arriving in the UK and this is not just happening in the UK; the USA, Canada and Australia are doing exactly the same.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): A professional couple from Malmesbury in my constituency tell me that they are in Poland trying to help their relations from Ukraine, who are very well-educated and English-speaking, of course. They tell me that they are sitting up late into the night tussling with the complexities of the forms involved, including one for a child who is one year old, to whom the form does not apply—it asks for his employment and so on. They tell me that the information they are getting on the website is quite different from the information they are getting on the ground; that,

like so many others, they have been told they cannot have an appointment for at least another week; and that the hotels in Poland are full and therefore they have nowhere to stay. They just need the thing simplified. I would not go as far as asking for a visa waiver, and the Minister would not want to do that, but surely to goodness he could make the system simpler, simplify the form and cut the time taken.

Kevin Foster: It is a fair point and I am certainly happy to hear my hon. Friend's feedback and what his constituents have encountered in more depth after the urgent question. As I say, more than 10,000 applications have been submitted to a scheme that went live on Friday, which indicates that quite a large number of people are getting through the process, but we certainly continue to consider how we can make it simpler and quicker and, as I have touched on, we are reviewing things such as the need for those aged under 18 to submit biometrics.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I am sure that, on International Women's Day, I do not have to remind the Minister of the particular vulnerability of women in war zones. My Edinburgh South West constituent Oleg Dmitriev has two nieces in Ukraine. He tells me that they are reluctant to flee because what they are hearing on the news makes them think it will be very difficult for them to join their uncle in Scotland. They are asking him why they should risk their lives to get to a third country when the likelihood of their getting a visa to join their uncle in the United Kingdom is vanishingly small. What should Oleg say to his nieces?

Kevin Foster: I would say to Oleg that, first, we have extended the scheme to include nieces, and if they are his nieces and he wishes them to come to the United Kingdom, they will be able to get a visa to do so. As the hon. and learned Lady touched on, in respect of travel from and within Ukraine, people are in a perilous situation due to the barbaric actions of Russian forces. As we have said, a niece would certainly stand a good chance of getting a visa and they should certainly make an application.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I am proud of my constituents who are coming forward to offer as much help as possible and I am proud of the Prime Minister in the way he is leading the world, but the Home Office is cutting off their legs and it is simply not good enough. Does the Home Office recognise that this is a war the likes of which have not been seen for 80 years in Europe? We do not want to stand in this House and listen to plans and processes; we want dates and we want action. The Home Office must react far more quickly than it is doing and get to the point of hubs of people, get them processed and get them in. This is a disgrace. I ask the Minister, when he leaves the Dispatch Box, to go back to the Home Office and tell it to get a grip!

Kevin Foster: As I have already outlined, we are making quite a number of changes. We met officials this morning to push further ones through and we have extended the entitlements and who can apply. As I say, this will become one of the biggest relocations of people since the wartime evacuation. Let us just get this into perspective and scale: it is beyond what we have done

[Kevin Foster]

for BNOs, what we have done over a number of years for Syrians and what we propose to do for Afghan nationals. This will show a generous side of the United Kingdom, alongside the support we have been providing for Ukraine more generally, which has created a very strong impression of the United Kingdom.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Yesterday, I was speaking to a constituent, Stephanie, who was fighting back the tears as she told me how terrified she is about the security of her family, with whom she has lost contact. I am disgusted by the lack of urgency and compassion from the Government. Will the Minister say why the visa application centre in Brussels is closed? Why is it open only three days a week?

Kevin Foster: As we say, we have been surging staff into the region. We do not want to see people having to travel all the way to western Europe to make applications, having left their country and having made what is now an increasingly dangerous journey across Ukraine, particularly if people come into contact with Russian forces, who are showing minimal respect for international law, or perhaps none at all. As we say, we are surging staff and increasing processing capacity, and Members will start to see the impact of that very shortly.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I am glad that the Home Secretary visited the Ukrainian social club in my constituency, with the Ukrainian ambassador, to hear directly from my residents. I have many Ukrainians in my constituency and a number have relatives who are still in Ukraine, where there are existing biometric records. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to look further at the ideas proposed by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns), to see whether we can find electronic solutions?

Kevin Foster: The Home Secretary had a positive visit and our relationship with the ambassadors and the community has been strong, given the broad range of support we are providing to Ukraine. We are providing support not just in the form of lethal aid into Ukraine itself but to countries, including those with borders with Ukraine, that are now dealing with large numbers of people because, as I keep saying, the vast majority of people want to remain close to their homes because they want to go home once the invader has been defeated and driven from their country.

We are looking further at how we can use some of the work we have done in respect of things such as the Hong Kong BNO route and the reuse of biometrics and, as I have touched on a couple of times, at whether under-18s need to submit biometrics at all.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): This Government have some pretty strange priorities: apparently, they think nothing of overturning national security advice when it comes to granting a life peerage to the son of an ex-KGB agent, but they are apparently putting obstacle after obstacle in front of refugees who are fleeing unspeakable violence in Ukraine. Will the Minister listen to the voices from all parties urging him to allow refugees to come here first and then do the biometrics

and other security checks here? Does he understand that simply to say they are already in safe countries is deeply insulting? They are traumatised, their families are split up and they might not have finance; we need to be doing much more, now.

Kevin Foster: I certainly would not dismiss the support that is being provided by the Polish, Hungarian, Romanian and Moldovan authorities. They are doing an amazing job of welcoming those who are coming straight over the border. We have on a number of occasions touched on why we believe it is right that we do basic security checks before people travel to the United Kingdom, but many of our other normal requirements are being waived. I do not think that some of the solutions potentially put forward around doing security checks here in the UK would necessarily reflect a warm-hearted approach.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): As it is International Women's Day, we are looking at the experiences of women around the world. I have been asked whether it is difficult being a pregnant MP; the answer is no. I will tell the House what is difficult: being a pregnant woman in Ukraine and children being in a basement where they are being attacked. Stroud people want to understand what the chuff is going on. I know that the Minister cares and that the Home Office cares, but the picture is still confused and causing anxiety. Will my hon. Friend confirm that he will look at all biometric options to speed up the process? In particular, will he ensure that when websites and things say that people will get information back after 24 hours, the Home Office provides that information or changes the expectation and deals with it properly?

Kevin Foster: As I say, we are certainly keen to look at the position in respect of biometrics for under-18s. That would make a significant difference, particularly for family applications. Some final security advice on that is being considered but we are keen to move forward shortly. We are looking at some of the electronic means—as I say, for those who are not familiar with the BNO visa, if someone has a HKSAR passport that is biometrically enabled, they can apply from home without a visit to a visa application centre. We are looking at a range of options that could speed things up and remove the need to go to a VAC.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Germans are waiting in Berlin Central station to offer Ukrainian refugees their homes and their hearts. The people of Newcastle Central are no less generous, yet their Government greets war-traumatised families who have already crossed a continent with a demand that they go to Brussels or Paris for an unspecified amount of time, apparently because the Minister thinks they could be KGB agents. Will he say how long he expects Ukrainian refugees to wait in Brussels or Paris? What support is he offering, financially and in terms of transport, so that they can meet his ridiculous demands?

Kevin Foster: Ensuring the safety and security of our country is never a ridiculous demand. As we have already touched on, we will be opening up a centre in Lille, and we have certainly already touched on what we are considering in respect of children. We have an uncapped, unlimited system. Again, our position is very similar to what some of our core allies are doing.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): My inbox, like that of many others, has been overwhelmed by generous offers of support for Ukrainian families. My constituents are ready and willing to offer help to those in desperate need. The only barrier to their support seems to be Home Office bureaucracy. Now is not the time, Minister, for box-ticking and red tape; now is the time to do everything we can. No more excuses: we have to move the process forward and we have to speed it up. I am sorry, Minister, but weeks—weeks—simply is not good enough. These are women and children. We have to speed it up. Will he assure me that those kind offers of help from my constituents and the constituents of Members throughout the Chamber are not going to be wasted?

Kevin Foster: Those kind offers will certainly not be wasted. We are moving at pace to set up our system and to increase the numbers while doing the basic security checks to keep our people safe.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): This may be down to Home Office incompetence, or this may be being done for political reasons, and, if it is, may I tell the Minister that he has misread the country? Like other people in this place, I have been overwhelmed by constituents offering their homes and the spaces that they have to refugees from Ukraine. The local charity, New Beginnings, which has been operating in Ukraine for many years, is desperate to sponsor people with no family links coming to the UK from Ukraine. When will that New Beginnings charity be able to sponsor Ukrainians to come here? It needs to know that this week.

Kevin Foster: I do not want to get into political point-scoring on this particular issue. It is neither seemly nor appropriate to do so. In terms of the routes, as we say, we place our first priority on families and relatives, because we appreciate that the vast majority of relatives will be able to stay with family. We are working at pace to set up the humanitarian sponsorship visa, but, obviously, our colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will be leading on operationalising the actual sponsorship element of that to ensure that we can give the warm-hearted welcome that many want to see.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I am so proud to represent a vibrant Ukrainian community in my Colne Valley constituency. I am equally proud to have so many people in my community opening their hearts and ready to open their homes for these Ukrainian refugees. We have done so much on sanctions, on humanitarian aid, and on military aid, so why are we dragging our feet with all this bureaucracy? Will the Minister not only commit to put extra staff into these visa centres, but ensure that they are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week? All the helplines need to be manned 24 hours a day. Can he assure me that, by the weekend, thousands and thousands more desperate Ukrainian refugees will be safe here in the UK with their family and friends?

Kevin Foster: I hear my hon. Friend's point. As he said, we are bringing in more decision makers—people from UK Visas and Immigration who are experienced in decision making—to ensure that, as soon as a decision is ready to go, we can get straight on and do it. We are certainly looking to expand, where we can, the visa

application capacity. Again, we need to make sure that we have enough staff. We are looking at whether we can backfill that with staff from the United Kingdom. Again, this is more about staff availability than the actual physical structure. Sometimes local labour laws impact on operations, but we do not think that that will be an issue in this particular instance given the urgency of the case. Crucially, as I have touched on a couple of times, we should look at whether we can remove entirely from some cases the need for an appointment—for example for under-18s—and at whether we can use the tech that we use for the British national overseas visas. Many BNO applicants never go near a VAC; they just use our ID with their passports. Again, that deals with the point about capacity without the need for any extra appointments.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Last week, I raised the case of my constituent and his wife who were advised by the Government helpline to come back from Poland to Lviv to collect her spousal visa. After my intervention, they were told to go to the VAC in Warsaw. An hour ago, they emailed me to say:

“We are just out of the VAC centre in Warsaw and again we have been told that they don't print visas and they can't help us. This time, according to the worker, their visa vignettes are printed in the UK and sent to the VACs. Unsurprisingly, the VAC didn't know how to help us. They didn't even have access to the Ukrainian database. I find it shocking that the Home Office couldn't arrange that access over two weeks.”

Can the Minister advise me when my constituent and his wife can come home safely to Glasgow?

Kevin Foster: Certainly, no one should be being advised now to go into Ukraine to get visas or for any other purpose. I am very happy to pick up the case to see what has happened in this particular instance. Certainly, a person should be able to collect a visa from any VAC, but I hear what is being said, I do not doubt it, and I am happy to pick up on it.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I met with four of my Ukrainian constituents last week. They have been bowled over by the generosity shown by the people of Ipswich, particularly by the Polish community. There is actually a lorry approaching the Ukrainian border today, carrying £8,000-worth of gifts from the Polish community. I have two questions. I met with Olena whose family are currently stuck in Kharkiv. Can I have a quite update on the possibility of a humanitarian corridor for her family to get out of Kharkiv, not to Belarus and Russia, but to a safe European country? Secondly, Viktoria said that if some of the people who are eligible for the family scheme do not want to take up that option can it be transferred to somebody else very close to them who might not strictly qualify for the family route?

Kevin Foster: Certainly, in terms of the situation on the ground in Kharkiv, we have to be very careful about how we take President Putin's offers of humanitarian corridors, not least because they are rarely respected and often may well be used as a cover for breaches of international law that then follow. We need to be quite careful about the whole concept of humanitarian corridors. I have already said that travel across Ukraine is extremely dangerous, and that people should not wait until they have any form of visa. If they can, they should get into a neighbouring country and then seek to come to the

[Kevin Foster]

United Kingdom. Certainly, with the family route, people can either sponsor the family, or, see whether there is space available. The wider sponsorship group will come in if there is someone they know and love in Ukraine, whom they would like to sponsor, or if there is someone who has managed to get to a safe bordering country, whom they would like to sponsor to come here.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I just want to give an example of a constituent who is trying to help his niece who has fled from Ukraine, because it backs up all the things that the Minister is hearing from his own side about how just completely unsustainable this system is. Last Friday, they spent the whole day waiting for a form from the United Kingdom for a visa. Of course with the biometrics, they had to give a lot of complex information. After they had given all that, they were then asked for bank details and documentation that the niece who had fled from Ukraine just did not have with her. It is now three days since that, and there is no sign of a decision, which had been promised within 48 hours. My constituent said:

“I simply cannot put into words how angry and desperate we are becoming because of this shameful situation.”

What is the Minister actually doing to fix that chaos? That is a live situation and that is actually what is happening.

Kevin Foster: I can fully appreciate why asking for bank details and the things that we might normally ask for in the immigration system might be an entirely unreasonable request to somebody who has escaped their home in Ukraine with whatever they could carry. I am very happy to look at that case to see whether our decision makers are acting appropriately in terms of what they are asking for. I do not think that it is appropriate, for example, to be asking for bank details from Ukraine at this time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. We have to leave that there. We have done eight minutes more than was allocated for the urgent question. Clearly, with this crisis ongoing, there will be other opportunities for urgent questions and statements. More than 20 people were still rising to speak at the end of the urgent question. We will look to ensure that they get prioritised in future.

Points of Order

1.47 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In the past 24 hours, the Foreign Secretary has twice accused me of seeking to slow down the UK Government’s ability to sanction individuals during the passage of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018—once, before the Foreign Affairs Committee, and, again, this morning during departmental questions. She made similar accusations against my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) before he corrected her and she was compelled to apologise for having got the facts wrong, gallantly blaming her staff for the quality of her notes.

The accusations that the Foreign Secretary made against me do not stand up to scrutiny—I am using parliamentary language here, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am particularly aggrieved by the Foreign Secretary’s suggestion that I, in her words,

“wanted changes to make it tougher for us to sanction oligarchs”.

At no point during the passage of that Act did I seek to slow down the Government’s ability to sanction individuals who posed a threat to the UK—quite the opposite. I was one of those who pushed for the inclusion of Magnitsky sanctions in the Act—sanctions against Russian oligarchs, which were then blocked by the Conservative Government who shut down the relevant Committee debate after half an hour to prevent the issue being put to a vote.

I welcome Conservative Ministers’ belated conversion to the importance of such measures, but not the Foreign Secretary’s attempt to rewrite history. The comments of mine to which she referred were explicitly about Ministers using so-called Henry VIII powers to amend primary legislation without parliamentary oversight, not what she has intimated.

Given these points, Mr Deputy Speaker, would it be in order for the Foreign Secretary to come to the House at the earliest opportunity and correct the record?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of her point of order. As the Speaker and the team from the Chair have said, we are not responsible for the content of contributions made by Ministers. However, her point has been heard on the Government Benches and, if an error has been made in this instance, I hope the Foreign Secretary will seek to correct it as quickly as possible.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was at the Foreign Affairs Committee yesterday when the Foreign Secretary made those allegations. She alleged that I had said things in the Third Reading debate on 1 May 2018. I did not take part in the debate on Third Reading in 2018, although in fact I did speak on that day, and if I say so myself it was a particularly fine speech—[*Interruption.*] Nobody else is going to say it, so I might as well.

The serious point here is twofold. First, the Foreign Secretary came to the Select Committee determined to say those things and had clearly not checked the basic facts before she came to the meeting, which would suggest a degree of deliberate recklessness about what she was going to say. Secondly, she then prayed in aid a

document that she said she had in front of her, which was some notes from officials that had apparently been incorrectly written out. You will know, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the convention in this House is that if a Minister prays a document in aid, they must provide it to the House. Can you ensure that the Foreign Secretary provides those notes? I am concerned that somewhere in the Foreign Office there is a file on me that is full of lies and inaccuracies.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. I have no doubt whatsoever that the speech he gave was outstanding. However, as far as his other comments are concerned, the answer is the same: the Treasury Bench will have heard his comments and I hope that, if any errors have been made, the Foreign Secretary will correct them as quickly as possible.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. My hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) talked in her point of order about the Foreign Secretary's suggesting that she could not read her notes because her officials had not written them very clearly. In topical questions, in answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) about who signed off a trade deal, the Foreign Secretary told the House that she did not know and that those deals were always signed off by officials.

Can you tell me, Mr Deputy Speaker, following the right hon. Lady's comments today, whether the Government have made any attempt to bring forward a statement to explain a change in the policy of ministerial responsibility? If they have not, have they made any suggestion that officials will now come to this House and answer questions and that Ministers are not responsible for them? It sounds to me as though the Foreign Secretary is getting a bit of a track record here of blaming things on everybody but herself.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I have been given no indication that any Minister will be making a statement today. Should that change, the House will be informed in the usual way.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. You will be aware that the House of Commons has just published a report by the independent expert panel on the conduct of Mr John Bercow. It says, in small part, that,

"21 separate allegations were proved and have been upheld. The House may feel that his conduct brought the high office of Speaker into disrepute.

This was behaviour which had no place in any workplace. Members of staff in the House should not be expected to have to tolerate it as part of everyday life."

I concur. There were many people in this House, including me, who tried to raise this matter on several occasions when John Bercow was Speaker, but nothing was done. Not only has John Bercow been shown to be of a disreputable nature, but in some ways this House has been brought into disrepute. Will there be any occasion for the Leader of the House to come to the House and make a statement about this damning report about John Bercow, and to give us an opportunity to debate how on earth this terror of bullying could have lasted so long?

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Mr Bercow has been shown in this report to be a "serial bully" who displayed "undermining behaviour" towards the staff of this House. The report describes a catalogue of dreadful conduct that is clearly unacceptable, risks damaging the reputation of this House and must never be allowed to happen again.

I have a couple of questions. First, there are a number of records of Mr Bercow's period in office throughout the building, which must be seen on a potentially daily basis by his victims. In light of this report and the need to set history in context, is there any intention on the part of Mr Speaker or the Speaker's Office to put explanatory plaques alongside them—for example, next to Mr Bercow's portrait in Speaker's House?

Secondly, is it in order to ask whether the Leader of the Opposition is happy to tolerate such bullying behaviour within his party, or whether he intends to expel Mr Bercow from the Labour party?

Thirdly, what can we do to ensure that such behaviour does not happen in the future?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank both hon. Members for their points of order. Clearly, this puts the Chair in an invidious position. Regarding any plaques being erected or what will follow on from the report, I have not had an opportunity to read the report myself at this time, so I cannot comment on it. However, there will be a business statement on Thursday at the normal time, and I suggest both Members turn up for that and ask the Leader of the House directly what will now transpire following the publication of that report.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is in the light of the many questions today during the urgent question about the humanitarian sponsorship pathway that the Government have announced. Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, in response to a question from the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), said of that humanitarian sponsorship policy that,

"more details will be announced later today and later this week."—*[Official Report, 7 March 2022; Vol. 710, c. 17.]*

I have checked on the departmental website and with the Vote Office, but there is no sign of any announcement being made yesterday as promised. Given the urgency and the questions raised today, what more can be done to hold the Secretary of State to account for the promise he made yesterday to this House?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the right hon. Lady for her point of order. As I said earlier, Ministers are responsible for the answers they give. However, after today's proceedings, some of which I have chaired, I think Ministers will be in no doubt whatsoever of the urgent desire for more details of the sponsorship scheme and that it should be clarified as quickly as possible. I hope the Treasury Bench will have heard that.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. On Thursday 3 March in a statement on the attack on Ukraine, the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport answered

[Christine Jardine]

my question on further support for the BBC World Service from her Department by saying that the World Service,

“is funded through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, not my Department”.—[*Official Report*, 3 March 2022; Vol. 709, c. 1205.]

I believe that in her response the Secretary of State may have inadvertently misled the House. The BBC World Service is chiefly funded by the UK licence fee, not by FCDO, although FCDO provides additional funding. Can you please advise on how I can have the record corrected, Mr Deputy Speaker, or whether it is possible to have a fresh response from the Secretary of State?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Again, I am grateful for advance notice of that point of order. The Chair is not responsible for the content of contributions made by Ministers, but I am sure the hon. Member's point has been heard on the Government Benches. Mr Double is going to be incredibly busy passing back some of those messages to Ministers—he is doing it as we speak, so let us hope the new technology is working properly; I think I can see smoke coming from his mobile phone—so the messages will get through to the relevant Ministers. We must move on now, because we have two Opposition day debates and presentations of Bills.

BILLS PRESENTED

OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT (WOMEN AND GIRLS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Layla Moran, supported by Daisy Cooper, Wendy Chamberlain, Sarah Olney, Sarah Green, Helen Morgan, Christine Jardine, Munira Wilson and Wera Hobhouse, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to lay before Parliament an equalities impact assessment of the effects on women and girls of the decision not to spend 0.7% of UK gross national income on official development assistance in each financial year until that target is again reached.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 268).

WOMEN LEAVING PRISON (SAFE ACCOMMODATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Daisy Cooper, supported by Wendy Chamberlain, Layla Moran, Sarah Olney, Sarah Green, Helen Morgan, Christine Jardine, Munira Wilson and Wera Hobhouse, presented a Bill to place a duty on the Lord Chancellor to ensure the provision of safe and secure accommodation for all women leaving prison; to require the Lord Chancellor to review support provided to women leaving prison with the objective of preventing such women becoming homeless; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 269).

STATE PENSION UNDERPAYMENTS (DIVORCED WOMEN) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sarah Green, supported by Daisy Cooper, Wendy Chamberlain, Layla Moran, Sarah Olney, Helen Morgan, Christine Jardine, Munira Wilson and Wera Hobhouse, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to expand the scope of the legal entitlements and administrative practice exercise to correct state pension underpayments to include underpayments to divorced women; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 270).

GENDER PAY GAP BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sarah Olney, supported by Daisy Cooper, Wendy Chamberlain, Layla Moran, Sarah Green, Helen Morgan, Christine Jardine, Munira Wilson and Wera Hobhouse, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to review the effectiveness of gender pay gap reporting requirements.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 271).

SURGICAL MESH (SUPPORT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sarah Green, supported by Daisy Cooper, Wendy Chamberlain, Layla Moran, Sarah Olney, Helen Morgan, Christine Jardine, Munira Wilson and Wera Hobhouse, presented a Bill to make provision about support for women who have suffered ill health as a result of the use of surgical mesh; to require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on the merits of establishing a redress scheme for such women; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 272).

MATERNITY SERVICES (RURAL AREAS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Daisy Cooper, supported by Wendy Chamberlain, Layla Moran, Sarah Olney, Sarah Green, Helen Morgan, Christine Jardine, Munira Wilson and Wera Hobhouse, presented a Bill to place a duty on the Secretary of State to ensure equal access to maternity services for people living in rural and coastal areas to those living in other areas, including access to the same range of birthing methods and locations; to require consultant-led maternity services to be available within 45 minutes of an expectant mother's home; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 273).

PLANNING (WOMEN'S SAFETY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Christine Jardine, supported by Daisy Cooper, Wendy Chamberlain, Layla Moran, Sarah Olney, Sarah Green, Helen Morgan, Munira Wilson and Wera Hobhouse, presented a Bill to require an assessment of the impact on women's safety to be published as a condition of planning approval for major developments.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 274).

MISCARRIAGE AND STILLBIRTH (BLACK AND ASIAN
WOMEN) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Munira Wilson, supported by Daisy Cooper, Wendy Chamberlain, Layla Moran, Sarah Olney, Sarah Green, Helen Morgan, Christine Jardine and Wera Hobhouse, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to lay before Parliament annual reports on progress in reducing miscarriage and stillbirth rates among Black and Asian women.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 275).

RAPE (CONVICTION RATES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Wera Hobhouse, supported by Daisy Cooper, Wendy Chamberlain, Layla Moran, Sarah Olney, Sarah Green, Helen Morgan, Christine Jardine and Munira Wilson, presented a Bill to establish an independent review of rape conviction rates and of the effects on the victims of rape; and to require the Secretary of State to act on the recommendations of the review.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 276).

Institutes of Technology
(Royal Charter)

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

2.1 pm

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for Institutes of Technology to apply to receive a Royal Charter; and for connected purposes.

At first blush, this might sound like a somewhat arcane issue involving an unlikely combination. The world of royal charters and the Privy Council approvals process may feel a million miles away from the new institute of technology agenda, but when I explain the reason for this proposal, then all should, and I hope will, become very clear.

One of the greatest challenges facing our country is the so-called skills gap—the shortfall between the demands of modern industry and business for suitably qualified entrants and the supply of people with those very qualifications. For too long, there was a dislocation between what our businesses actually needed and what was being provided educationally. A range of studies have identified the lack of people in our country with higher technical skills and the economy's growing need for even more skilled technicians. Without change, productivity rates will slow or even fall, which means lower wages and an economy no longer at the cutting edge of innovation.

The policy response was, rightly, the creation of institutes of technology. IOTs are a new type of provider designed specifically to deliver the technical STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—skills, mainly at levels 4 and 5, that employers and our economy need. Their main characteristic is a model of collaborative work involving partnerships between further education providers and higher education providers with a proven track record, and, vitally, employers, this time with employers right at the heart of decision making and the development and delivery of the curriculum.

Following a rigorous competition, 12 wave 1 IOTs were established, supported by £170 million of capital grant funding to invest in state-of-the-art equipment and facilities. My hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) and I pushed the Department for Education hard for Swindon to be selected, and we were delighted when Swindon and Wiltshire Institute of Technology was announced as part of the first wave. It received capital funding of over £17 million and launched last year with a range of new courses based on both campuses in Swindon. My hon. Friend, with whom I have always worked as part of our joint team for Swindon, strongly supports this Bill too. As well as delivering against their own work programmes, I am glad to see that the IOTs are involved in the delivery of key initiatives in the 2021 skills for jobs White Paper, such as the skills accelerator, the in-work skills pilot, and the higher technical qualifications growth fund.

Our 2019 manifesto committed to introducing a further eight IOTs. The Department ran another competition, and I am glad to say that a further nine proposals have now been selected to become new IOTs. These are backed by an additional £120 million of capital grant funding, bringing the total to be invested in IOTs to

[Sir Robert Buckland]

£290 million. That will mean that there will be 21 IOTs across England comprising over 75 further education providers and 34 universities, and over 100 employers, including Microsoft, Nissan, Bosch, Babcock, Fujitsu and many more. They are delivering a wide range of technical courses in STEM sectors such as construction, advanced manufacturing, digital and cyber- security, agritech, aerospace, automotive engineering, healthcare and laboratory science. Being employer-led, IOTs can tailor their provision to react quickly to the current and evolving technical skills needs of employers in the areas that they serve. There might be a skills shortage in areas such as transport or in supporting the fourth industrial revolution, which requires new skills in artificial intelligence, data and innovative technologies. I believe that IOTs can help to plug that gap.

IOTs also play a vital part in levelling up skills across the country by providing local people with the skills they need to pursue rewarding jobs and local businesses with the skilled workforces that they need; by acting as catalysts of regional growth, helping to halt the draining of talent out of overlooked and undervalued areas of the country by training local people for the jobs of the future today; and by helping to create a workforce that is ready for future and further technological change and changing working practices.

The Government have always rightly seen IOTs as “the pinnacle of technical training”,

and the next step is to cement that status. Learners and employers alike need to see IOTs as the go-to provider of levels 4 and 5 technical STEM provision, benefiting not just themselves but the economy as a whole. Choosing to study, say, engineering at an IOT must be seen as an equivalent alternative to studying at degree level at one of our best universities.

To firmly establish IOTs as the pre-eminent organisations for technical STEM education, I want to ensure that successful IOTs may apply to receive a royal charter, securing their long-term position as anchor institutions within their region and placing them on the same level as our world-leading historic universities. I am confident that the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), and the Department he represents here today will support this initiative and that a new process for IOTs to apply will—sooner rather than later, I hope—become a reality.

All this comes within an even wider context. I am glad that skills reforms are already well under way, with apprenticeships, T-levels and IOTs, of course, all being part of this and being interlinked as well. At long last, we are building a technical education system that is going to drive prosperity at a local level as well as at a national one. The indicator of success is the Government’s very own target of 200,000 more people successfully completing high-quality training every year by the end of the decade, including 80,000 more people completing courses in areas of England with the lowest skill levels.

Skills have to be part of the levelling-up agenda. That is why I welcome the new future skills unit, which will use data and evidence on where skills gaps exist and in what industries. Data will be our great ally. On top of this, thousands more adults will be able to access free and flexible training, and get the skills needed in sectors that are booming, such as green technologies, digital and construction. This is all part of an additional boost to expand skills bootcamps to support employers across the country, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, to get the skilled people they need to grow. The levelling-up White Paper has the right goal—to support a high-wage, high-skill economy by building skills and human capital, particularly in those places where they are weakest. This includes supporting local people to realise their career aspirations without having to leave their communities, and ensuring that local employers have access to the skills they need to grow and thrive.

The mission for productivity, pay, jobs and living standards also supports the Government’s commitment to employment and ensures that people have the opportunity to access quality jobs and make progress at work. In Swindon, I have seen for myself the excellent facilities being used to teach and train apprentices in the higher-level healthcare and science pathway, with courses delivered by dedicated NHS professionals with continuing frontline experience. The work of important local employers such as Nationwide has helped develop courses in digital skills, and collaboration with local universities such as Oxford Brookes and the University of Gloucestershire is adding even more value to those courses, with full degree qualifications on offer. In short, IOTs are not going to work if they act as remote islands. They have to be part of a mosaic of local provision, giving people choices and clear routes to achieve the qualifications that will serve them well in their chosen careers.

When I was a Law Officer, in conjunction with the Privy Council Office, I used to check and approve royal charters for a range of public and private bodies. The threshold for acceptance is a high one: in essence, they should be conferred only when appropriate, on bodies that are beyond political controversy. I believe that nothing I have said today about IOTs is a matter of political controversy, and that IOTs fall into a suitable category for consideration of the approval of royal charters. As I said at the beginning of my speech, what seems like a dry procedure is in fact the opening of a door to new opportunities and an effective means of ensuring that skills qualifications, which are a vital way of increasing productivity, get the recognition they clearly deserve and that IOTs, which offer life-changing opportunities to thousands of people, will be a permanent part of our educational landscape.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Sir Robert Buckland, Chris Skidmore, Carolyn Harris, Robert Halfon, Richard Graham, Theo Clarke, Sir Robert Neill, Kelly Tolhurst, Mrs Pauline Latham, Jo Gideon, James Daly and Edward Timpson present the Bill.

Sir Robert Buckland accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 277).

Opposition Day

[15TH ALLOTTED DAY]

National Insurance Contributions Increase

2.13 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to cancel its planned 1.25 percentage point rise in National Insurance Contributions that will cost families an average of £500 per year from April 2022.

Six months ago today in this Chamber, I set out Labour's opposition to the Conservatives' national insurance tax hike. It was clear to us then that this was going to be a heavy burden on working people and businesses who could ill afford it. Since that time, the situation has worsened, but the Conservative party has not altered its wrong course. Filling up the car with petrol is more expensive, energy bills are soaring, and the cost of the weekly food shop is rising. It all adds up. Inflation is now 5.5%, the highest level since 1992, and is forecast to reach a massive 8% next month, outpacing people's pay rises—if they get one at all. Growth is expected to slow further. The stark reality is that over the past 12 years, the Tories have become the party of high taxes because they are now the party of low growth.

This morning's report by the Resolution Foundation finds that the average household will experience a £1,000 hit from tax rises and energy price increases this year under the Conservative Government. The Treasury Committee rightly highlighted the Office for Budget Responsibility's forecast, which stated that "the policy mix chosen by the Chancellor"

at the last Budget

"will act as a boost to inflation".

Just focus on that for a moment: the Chancellor's own policy choices are boosting inflation. The Government should have acted when the cost of living crisis started growing last September and well before it spiralled out of control in December, with costs soaring and inflation heating up.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is devastating lives and livelihoods, and we must do all we can to stop Putin's aggression. What is happening in Ukraine will have a cost of living effect here at home, too. When the facts change, so should the Government's policies; people cannot afford Ministers carrying on regardless of worsening circumstances. The Chancellor must show some understanding of the real-world consequences of his policies for working people and businesses.

The spring Budget will take place two weeks tomorrow, on 23 March. If the Government cannot commit to halting the national insurance rise today, they must do so then, two weeks before it comes in on 6 April and hits working people and employers hard. Today is an opportunity for the Conservatives to show that they get it, and do not want to make the cost of living crisis even worse than it already is.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The hon. Lady is making an important speech. She is right that the national insurance rise will cripple families who

are already struggling to get by, but does she agree that what makes it worse is that not a penny of the money raised will go into the hands of hard-working carers who desperately need it? In a community such as mine that is above the national average age, with a need for more carers, that means people without care or with inadequate care.

Rachel Reeves: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. That is the great deceit at the heart of this national insurance tax rise. I will address some of those details in a moment.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I fully support what the hon. Lady is saying. Does she agree that some of the measures we have seen for dealing with the cost of living crisis—for instance, the energy rebate—might now make matters worse? That rebate works on the basis that it will be repaid over subsequent years, and will only really work if energy prices normalise or fall, but all projections now indicate that energy prices will rise and rise, so the Government's interventions are going to be inflationary and add to the problems people are facing.

Rachel Reeves: I fully agree with the hon. Gentleman. A buy now, pay later scheme for energy prices, based on the premise that prices are going to fall, does not bear any relation to the facts. That is why I say, when the facts change, so should the Government's policies. They should not just carry on steering the boat in the wrong direction, towards the storm.

It is fair to say that the Prime Minister's word has recently been deeply discredited, but let me remind the Chamber what he previously said about tax:

"Read my lips: we will not be raising taxes on income, or VAT, or national insurance."

This is not just another of the long list of broken vows from a leader who has a fleeting relationship with truth and accuracy. This manifesto breach now belongs to the entire Conservative Government and especially the Chancellor, who seems not to want to take responsibility for his own tax rises. Let us not forget that last March, a year into the pandemic, the Chancellor said,

"We're not going to raise the rates of income tax, national insurance, or VAT."

This is not just the wrong thing to do; it is a broken promise. It is a clear and flagrant breach of the Conservative party's own manifesto. They promised the public that they would not do this, and now they are going back on their word.

The Chancellor is not here to defend his new tax on jobs—I do not know why—but it is becoming increasingly clear that rather than help people now when they really need it, the Chancellor is telling his colleagues and briefing newspapers that he will make people wait until an election, when he wants to make a new set of promises to win people's votes. People need help now and the Government should act now, not play games with people's living standards. Voters are smarter and savvier than the Chancellor assumes. They have already seen through his buy now, pay later loan scheme, meant to help with energy bills. It is not too late for the Government to look again at Labour's proposal for a one-off windfall tax on oil and gas producers in order to cut household energy bills by up to £600 this year. The case for our proposal gets stronger by the day, and

[Rachel Reeves]

the Chancellor should adopt it, but instead of easing the cost of living crisis, the Conservatives are the cost of living crisis.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Lady is making a very powerful speech and some excellent points with which I agree. Does she agree that the Government are gambling with taxpayers' money, rather than investing it? They are gambling that the price will go down, when we all know it will go up, and they are not looking to those people who have made a massive profit over the past two years, both from the energy crisis and in the pandemic, to try to relieve the burden on those who have been hardest hit.

Rachel Reeves: Politics is about choices; the hon. Lady makes an important point. This Government are making the choice to increase taxes on ordinary working people and those who employ them, while on the Opposition Benches, we say that those who have benefited from the high energy prices should pay a bit more in tax to relieve the pressure on ordinary working people. We have a Conservative Minister who goes on the TV and radio and says that energy companies and the North sea oil and gas companies are struggling right now. Tell that to my constituents, the hon. Lady's constituents and all our constituents who are struggling to pay the bills, while the profits keep coming in for the big oil and gas producers.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does the hon. Lady not agree that what she is saying is all smoke and mirrors? If a tax is put in for one year, that will not pay for the continuing costs over future years. What she is doing is simply misleading the public.

Rachel Reeves: If we raised those taxes now on North sea oil and gas companies, we could bring in money that could be used to relieve pressure now. I think that the right hon. and learned Gentleman's constituents in North East Hertfordshire would be pretty pleased to have money off their bills this year, rather than the buy now, pay later scheme that we get from this Chancellor.

Why is the Chancellor not listening? The Conservatives' rise in national insurance will hit almost 30 million working people. The TUC rightly argues that it is wrong to hit young and low-paid workers while "leaving the wealthy untouched". The British Chambers of Commerce describes the Government's policy as

"a drag anchor on jobs growth".

The CBI put it bluntly and said that it will

"hurt a business's ability to hire staff".

On Sunday, the Federation of Small Businesses warned:

"Slamming small firms with a jobs tax hike will put the brakes on investment, upskilling and growth within communities most affected by the pandemic."

The Chancellor must know what business organisations and trade unions are saying. We can only conclude that he is consciously disregarding their experience and views. We know from research by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research that job-intensive sectors will be disproportionately hit hard. The Conservatives

have deliberately designed a tax hike that will hit people working in hotels, restaurants, transport, retail and wholesale especially hard.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con) *rose*—

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

Rachel Reeves: I will give way to the hon. Lady, and then to the hon. Gentleman.

Dr Johnson: I wonder if the hon. Lady can help me, because I am slightly confused. She has talked about a windfall tax on the energy companies, but she is then conflating that with the NI rise. The NI rise is not to pay for energy bills, as I understand it, but to pay for health and social care. Last week, she wanted to use that windfall tax to spend on reducing energy prices, as she has said today. She cannot use one tax to do two things. What will she use the tax for, were she to bring it in? In particular, if she were to cancel the NI rise—I do not want to increase taxes; I am a Conservative, so of course I do not want to do that—how would she pay for the care and healthcare of those vulnerable constituents who we know need it so badly?

Rachel Reeves: The average household in the hon. Lady's constituency will be £1,200 worse off because of the tax increases and the price rises happening as a result of her Government's policies. As she well knows, we would use the windfall tax to relieve pressure on household gas and electricity bills. The hon. Lady might oppose that, but I suggest she puts that on her leaflets and puts that to the voters in her constituency at the next election.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Rachel Reeves: Sorry, I said I would give way to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I will do that and then I will make a little more progress.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for putting forward her point of view. My party and I supported her party on a previous Opposition day in relation to a tax on oil and gas. Today the hon. Lady is, on behalf of the Opposition, putting forward something that is equally important. In my constituency of Strangford, fuel prices are up 50% and grocery prices are up between 25% and 30%. Does she agree that while for some the national insurance contributions increase will be a weightless straw, it could well be the straw that breaks the camel's back?

Rachel Reeves: The hon. Gentleman speaks powerfully on behalf of his constituents, who are struggling with the double whammy of prices increasing, particularly gas and electricity bills, at the same time as this Government are piling on pressure after pressure with higher taxes on the same people who are paying those higher bills. He is absolutely right that people can only take so much, and the national insurance contribution tax hike is, as he says, potentially the straw that breaks the camel's back.

Politics is about priorities, and it is about choices. So who has the Chancellor chosen to protect—not to tax more? Those who earn huge incomes from a large portfolio of buy-to-let properties or those making large

sums from selling stocks and shares will not pay a penny more tax on that income. The super-rich will not be paying more. Roman Abramovich and billionaire oligarchs are not being made to pay more tax. In fact, some of those trying to relinquish their assets now appear to be using offshore vehicles to avoid paying tax. Lubov Chernukhin, wife of Putin's former finance Minister, and mega-donor to the Tory party, has reportedly lobbied Ministers against higher taxes for the wealthy. As luck would have it, she will not be paying any more tax, unlike people across Britain who work for a living and keep our economy going.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): My hon. Friend has mentioned not taxing buy-to-let landlords who have a number of properties. I do not think she is aware that the permanent secretary for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities came to the Select Committee yesterday and confirmed that, where properties are let with council tax and rents being paid in the same bill, the council tax rebate of £150 will go not to the tenant, but the landlord. If the landlord owns multiple properties, as long as they are not owned by a corporate entity, they will get multiple amounts of £150. Some of the landlords are going to be extremely well off, and tenants will have to go and apply to the discretionary fund to get any help at all.

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that to the House's attention. It is exactly why Labour said that the warm home discount should be expanded to ensure that the money goes to the people who need it, not the landlords.

At the same time as the Government are asking hard-working British people to pay more in tax, they are writing off billions of pounds in fraud. Ordinary people are paying for this Government's waste. The Chancellor repeatedly ignored warnings about the holes in his covid business support schemes, resulting in £4.3 billion of public money being written off. That does not even include the amounts lost to bounce back loan fraud, including taxpayer cash handed out to drug dealers and organised criminals. That fraud currently stands at £4.7 billion, so that is £9 billion and counting handed to fraudsters. Then there is the colossal Government waste during the pandemic, with £8.7 billion lost on unusable personal protective equipment, all paid for by the taxpayer. Billions has been spent on crony contracts that have not delivered, and every single cheque has been signed by the Chancellor.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con) *rose—*

Rachel Reeves: Let me just finish this point. Yesterday, we saw a whole new meaning to burning through money. After wasting billions on unusable PPE, the Government are literally burning it to get rid of it—putting taxpayers' money through the furnace. The Conservatives' promise to get value for money for taxpayers has gone up in flames. Taxpayers do not want to keep picking up the price of these dodgy contracts, fraud and waste. I will be very interested to hear the hon. Gentleman's views on that.

Richard Graham: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. The difficulty is that this is a debate about the national insurance contributions increase; it is not a debate about her wide range of thoughts on all sorts of other

aspects of the economy. The problem with this particular debate is that this additional tax, which is hypothecated exclusively for health and care, will make a huge difference to millions of people across the country, including in Leeds, who have been waiting for elective surgery, want to see social care resolved and need the extra funds for it to happen. In addition, it is progressive, because the top 14% of taxpayers will pay half of the revenue raised. Surely she would approve of that.

Rachel Reeves: The hon. Gentleman knows that the average household in Gloucester will be £1,299 worse off because of the double whammy of tax increases and price increases. I think they would be pretty concerned about the amount of taxpayers' money that is being written off in fraud and waste—money that is being burned by the Government.

Despite waste and fraud costing more than this year's national insurance contribution rise will raise, the Prime Minister says that the tax rise is necessary. That is the great deceit. On the steps of Downing Street in 2019, he claimed to have a plan for social care. Yet almost three years on, we know that the Government's approach to social care will not stop people selling their home to pay for care, it will not deliver a penny more to improve care today, and it will not add a single minute of care and support for those who need it. Even then, NHS waiting lists are set to rise even further for the next two years. The Government will not fix the problems with our social care sector or our NHS. Never before have taxpayers been asked to pay so much and got so little in return.

It is time for the Chancellor to urgently change direction. The national insurance tax rise was wrong in September and it is even worse in March. It is the wrong tax at the wrong time: the cost of living is higher, inflation is out of control, wages are not keeping up, energy bills are going through the roof and family finances are stretched, yet the Chancellor refuses to back our windfall tax plans to help.

The Chancellor has not turned up today, but my message to the Minister is that he must turn up to the spring Budget with a plan to make a difference to the cost of living. The Chancellor's tax rise should not go ahead. MPs can send the strongest signal today by backing our calls to cancel the national insurance tax increase next month. They know full well that our country believes that it is time to change course.

The Conservative Government are not doing enough to cushion the blows. In fact, when it comes to the tax rise, they are piling on the pressure and making matters worse. They must think again and back Labour's motion today.

2.32 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr Simon Clarke): The world has been appalled by Russia's unprovoked, unjustified and illegal invasion of Ukraine. Every one of us has been shocked by the scenes of sheer horror that have unfolded over recent days and moved by the bravery of ordinary men and women defending their country against a merciless enemy. As the Prime Minister wrote at the weekend, the Ukrainians' valour has helped to unite the international community.

We cannot let down that brave nation in its hour of need, which is why we are calling on the world to join forces and maximise our economic pressure on Putin's

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regime. That means going further than the unprecedented sanctions that are already in place, including by working with our allies to further isolate Russia from the international financial system and by expelling more Russian banks from the SWIFT network. The cost of inaction against Putin's war machine would be too great to contemplate; we have seen the price of appeasement before.

We must brace ourselves, however, for the fact that a robust united global opposition to Russia's unprovoked aggression will have costs of its own. I am acutely aware that the conflict has economic repercussions that largely stem from a higher global energy price that, over time, may spill over into other commodities including wheat. Those repercussions are being felt across the world, including here at home.

That is why, this financial year and next, we will provide over £20 billion to help the public with the cost of living. That includes over £9 billion of direct support with higher energy costs for about 28 million households, with £200 for every household in Great Britain through the energy bill support scheme and a further £150 for every household in council tax bands A to D in England. In total, that means that about 80% of households will receive £350 of support. That builds on our further support for heating bills including increasing the warm home discount, the winter fuel payment and the cold weather payment, which together provided £2.5 billion to households last winter. The £500 million household support fund has been helping the most vulnerable with the cost of essentials over the past months.

More broadly, we are taking further steps to support people's finances. We have cut the universal credit taper rate by 8p from 63p to 55p and we have increased the work allowance by £500 a year, which will ensure that nearly 2 million people keep more of what they earn and will put an extra £1,000 a year into their pockets.

Christine Jardine: Does the Minister appreciate that, for Opposition Members and our constituents, and possibly for many of his constituents, that now seems too little, too late and inappropriate for the situation in which the country finds itself?

Mr Clarke: I do not demur; we are faced with a serious challenge on the cost of living. The Government entirely accept that and are working to address it, but we must address it in a smart and financially sustainable way. A £20 billion package is a major commitment to support families across the UK. Of course, we continue to keep all our options under review to ensure that we can act in a way that is commensurate with the severity of the situation.

From next month, we will increase the national living wage by 6.6% to £9.50 an hour for those aged 23 and over, which will benefit more than 2 million workers across the UK by £1,000 a year. We have also frozen fuel duty for the 12th year in a row. That is on top of the help that we are already providing to those on low incomes with their housing costs and council tax bills.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): On freezing the fuel duty, if the Minister has been to forecourts recently, he will know that the cost of petrol

and diesel has gone up tremendously in the last few weeks. What has been the impact on the Treasury's coffers from VAT receipts as a result?

Mr Clarke: We have forgone a tremendous amount of revenue through the freeze on fuel duty. On VAT, we obviously continue to look closely at the revenue situation. It is sometimes a misapprehension about the way that the VAT scheme works to the Treasury's benefit. There is often a focus on domestic fuel and the impact that it is having on our income. To that point, the more that people spend of their discretionary income on domestic fuel costs, which are VAT chargeable at 5% as opposed to the full rate of 20%, the less that the Treasury recoups. In that regard, we have to be careful about some of the arguments around that.

Now that I have set out some of the context of the Government's response, I will return to the specifics of the debate—the need for the health and social care levy and the rationale behind its operation. Last month, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care explained to the House that there is now a significant backlog of elective care as a result of the pandemic, which my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) alluded to. More than 6 million people are waiting for elective care in England and more than 300,000 people are waiting longer than a year. The Government have set out a clear plan to tackle the backlog, but we must deal with that most pressing of issues and the levy will allow us to do that.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): Many things have happened in the last few weeks, but we must reflect on the fact that, for the last two years, we have been in the worst global health crisis for years during which the Government spent £450 billion to support people's livelihoods. Any Government would need to look at themselves and recognise the enormous issues that that has created. It is simply unsustainable to continue to pay for services without looking at how we can gain more revenue for the Treasury. That is a sensible financial decision that any Government would have to make in the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Mr Clarke: I agree with my hon. Friend. The hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) said that when the facts change, we should change our policy, but the point is that the facts have not changed. The covid backlog has not changed and the damage that it has done to our ability to deliver the healthcare that people need has not gone away. Governments have recognised the importance of tackling our social care issues for a long time, but there is no record of action. This time, things are different. We believe that it is only right that in an advanced and wealthy country such as the United Kingdom, people should know that their loved ones will have dignity and financial certainty if they require care. The new levy will allow us to achieve both our health and social care aims.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Betts: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Clarke: I will take one more intervention and then I will make some progress.

Dr Caroline Johnson: The hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) talked about politics meaning choices. I have listened carefully to both Front-Bench speeches and I heard that the Opposition want to remove the health and social care levy but not how they will pay for social care instead. Perhaps the Minister heard something I did not. Could he enlighten me?

Mr Clarke: I heard a lot of warm and fairly vague phrases, but I did not hear a concerted plan, and that of course goes to the heart of this question. The hon. Member for Leeds West said in her speech that the voters are smart and savvy, and I agree with her, but they know an Opposition playing politics when they see it.

The £12 billion average annual investment, which is of course a recurring investment—that is the crucial point—to meet a recurring need, will tackle the elective NHS backlog, while ensuring that the health service has the resources it needs over the coming years. It will strengthen our adult social care system, allowing us to invest at least £500 million to give our army of extraordinary social care workers new skills, and it will enable the Government to roll out the long-awaited reforms to funding for families through a cap on adult social care costs.

This is a transformative policy that will tackle serious and long-standing issues, but to fund such a significant increase in permanent spending we have had to make the tough but responsible choice to increase taxes. Only a broad-based tax such as income tax, VAT or national insurance can raise the sums needed for such significant investment. Using NICs as the base has several advantages. First, it means the levy will be paid for by employers, employees and the self-employed, including, from April next year, by workers over state pension age.

Secondly, this is a progressive way to raise funds because those who earn more will pay more: the top 15% of taxpayers will pay half the revenue. A basic rate taxpayer will pay about £3.49 per week, while 6.2 million—6.2 million—of the lowest earners will be exempt entirely from the levy and most small businesses will not be affected at all.

Mr Betts: Will the Minister give way now?

Mr Clarke: I will give way.

Mr Betts: The Minister talks about health and social care, but will he confirm that there is not a single penny in this extra funding to enable local authorities to cover their social care costs in their budget, which they are struggling with, or to improve the level of the social care they are offering? This crisis has now been going on for years and years, and the Government have promised to fix it. Given that this is a permanent increase in funding, will he also confirm that we are not going to see a tax cut in the next couple of years, just before the election—up today, down tomorrow?

Mr Clarke: On the hon. Gentleman's point about our support for local authorities, we are giving £1.6 billion extra in each year of the spending review we announced in October to support local authorities with the challenges they face. Of course, the levy will fund £5.4 billion of investment in social care over the next three years, so it is a serious response to a serious challenge.

To return to the advantages of the way we have structured the levy, the third design advantage that stands out is that we have also announced an equivalent increase in dividend tax rates. There is therefore fairness across the spectrum in how this is being paid for.

I know there are some who ask why we need to raise tax at all, and instead say that we should borrow to fund permanent increases in spending. Throughout this speech I have outlined all that the Government have done to protect people's finances as we recover from the pandemic and deal with the rising cost of living, and those actions mean our economy has made a strong recovery from covid-19. Our GDP has rebounded, and over the past months job vacancies have hit record highs, while the unemployment rate has fallen sharply. However, it is easy to forget that all those steps come at a huge cost. Covid casts a long shadow across our economy. Indeed, our debt is at its highest since the early 1960s. As I have reminded the House on many occasions, that high level of borrowing leaves us susceptible to shocks, including changes in interest rates and inflation.

Dr Caroline Johnson: My right hon. Friend is making some excellent points about the importance of balance in our finances. One thing my constituents will want to know as we spend all this money from the health and social care levy is that it is being well spent and used very efficiently. What can my right hon. Friend tell me about how he will ensure that the money is spent efficiently and with the best possible productivity?

Mr Clarke: Making sure that we spend taxpayers' money wisely is the central duty of any Government. It is something that, as Chief Secretary, I work very hard on with officials and Departments to make sure that we scrutinise spending in the way that delivers best value.

Some fairly spurious points have been raised about our record on issues such as PPE procurement, and we need to remember what I think could best be described as the brass neck of the Opposition in calling us out on this issue, when I think the hon. Member for Leeds West suggested at one point that we should procure our PPE from historical theatre re-enactment companies or fancy dress companies. Procuring PPE at pace brought with it some inevitable challenges, and it is vital that we had the resources to deal with the situation we faced at the time.

Richard Graham: The debate this afternoon is fascinating in a number of ways. The first one is that the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) rightly pointed out that Government is about choice. I remember vividly coming into this place in 2010, when the maximum someone could earn before paying tax was £6,000. It is now £12,500, which means £1,000 more in take-home pay for millions of our constituents. My right hon. Friend has confirmed that more than 6 million taxpayers will not be paying anything at all towards the 1.5% increase in national insurance, which will pay for their families' and their parents' hospital care and social care.

Mr Clarke: I entirely agree with what my hon. Friend has said, and it is a reflection of the fact that we have taken sensible measured steps against what has been a recurring series of unprecedented challenges—the financial crisis, our exit from the European Union, covid, and now the backdrop of conflict in Ukraine. All these

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things have had a major impact on the world around us, but our focus has consistently been on supporting people to do the right thing and to protect their finances.

Sir Oliver Heald: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Clarke: I should make some progress, but I will take one more intervention.

Sir Oliver Heald: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the rise in the national living wage should not be ignored and is important in helping people at the bottom of the income spectrum? It is right to take such measures, but the Opposition's asking for more money the whole time but not being prepared to put in any resource is a ridiculous smoke and mirrors job.

Mr Clarke: It is, and my right hon. and learned Friend is precisely right because, in the end, it is poorest who will lose out the most if we lose control either of our public spending or of inflation. To illustrate, a 1 percentage point rise in both inflation and interest rates would increase spending on debt interest by nearly £23 billion a year, and that threat is not a notional one. In January 2021 we spent £1.6 billion on servicing our debt, but in January this year we spent £6.1 billion. We cannot fund increases in spending on our health service and social care by increasing borrowing. Members will surely agree that to leave ourselves vulnerable at this time by further increasing our debt burden would be highly irresponsible. These are not always easy choices, but we will be the ones to reconcile the need to reduce our debt burden with the growing pressures on the state, and that means responsible choices about taxation.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Clarke: I have given way many times, and I am afraid that I must make progress.

The Opposition claim that they would instead grow the economy to finance their choices. With all due respect to the hon. Member for Leeds West, that is not a credible solution to an immediate problem. I remind the House that this is the same Opposition who want to place a windfall tax on our vital North sea oil and gas producers—companies that already pay a headline tax rate on their profits of more than double the rate of corporation tax. With investment in the sector hitting an all-time low in 2020-21, such a tax on oil and gas would not be an appropriate solution. It would only create uncertainty, deter investment and displace the investment that we need in clean, renewable technologies.

As the Chancellor has recently set out, we firmly believe in lower taxes. The pounds generated by our country are better spent by individuals and businesses than by Government. However, cutting tax sustainably requires hard work and prioritisation, especially when demands on the state are growing. We must reach our goals in a responsible way that addresses our challenges, too. This levy is the best and most equitable way to raise the funds needed to protect health and social care across the United Kingdom, and I await any credible explanation from the Opposition of how they plan to cover these costs in a responsible way.

I will end by saying that this Government recognise the difficulties that people across this country are facing right now. We know times are hard, and we are working hard to alleviate that pressure, but as a responsible Government we must not shy away from difficult decisions. It is only by meeting such challenges head-on that we will succeed in building a health and social care system that is fit for the future and that truly supports our citizens at every stage in their lives.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Before I call Richard Thomson, let me say that there is clearly a lot of interest in this debate. As Members know, exceptionally, we are suspending the House at 4.45 pm to take the President of Ukraine's speech, and we will then move on to the second Opposition day debate. May I therefore ask Back Benchers to focus on the length of their contributions so that we can get in as many people as possible?

2.49 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): That we are currently experiencing the gravest cost of living crisis in memory should not be in the least bit a controversial thing to say. It has been caused by inflation from a number of fronts: the shortage of labour caused by Brexit and the ending of free movement; the increased trade frictions as a direct consequence of Brexit; covid-19 and all that has befallen us over the last two years; and, most recently, the rapidly increasing costs of energy. Amidst all this it is absolutely extraordinary that any sentient, competent Government would seek to pile on the agony by increasing national insurance contributions for employers, employees and the self-employed.

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Richard Thomson: I will give way shortly but first want to make some progress, because this represents a shattering of the Conservatives' manifesto promises—and I am sure the hon. Member will want to be fully cognisant of this before he takes to his feet to chide me. On page 2—the inside page—of the Conservative party's 2019 manifesto, entitled "Get Brexit Done: Unleash Britain's Potential", we had an introduction from no lesser a personage than the Prime Minister himself, rather grandiosely titled "My Guarantee", which said:

"We will not raise the rate of income tax, VAT or national insurance".

That was signed off with the Prime Minister's signature, and it was a statement quite literally not worth the paper it was written on.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Richard Thomson: I am spoiled for choice; I give way to the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne).

Anthony Browne: The hon. Member makes some very valid points about the rise in the cost of living in the UK, which we absolutely accept is a real challenge, but he puts many of the reasons for it down at the feet of the British Government; does he not accept that this is a global phenomenon? Does he not accept that the increase

in energy prices is a global phenomenon affecting all countries around the world, that the crunch in the supply chains resulting from the global pandemic is a global phenomenon, and that inflation is higher in America and Germany than in the UK—and in the latest figures UK inflation is below the OECD average?

Richard Thomson: For a moment there, I was going to ask the hon. Member if he would give way to me. Yes, I do accept most of those things but, as I also set out very clearly, there are those aspects that are exogenous and global and there are those, such as through Brexit and from the poor response to covid in many respects, that are entirely self-inflicted. I am happy to draw a distinction and I hope that, on reflection, the hon. Member might do so, too.

Let us not be in any doubt about the enormity of the crisis facing us. The National Institute of Economic and Social Research has warned that the number of UK households classed as destitute could rise by nearly a third to more than 1 million this spring after the Government bring in their national insurance increase. Ofgem recently announced that millions of householders will see their energy bills rise by £693 as a result of the increase in the energy cap from April. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation warns that the energy price cap rise will have a harsher impact on the poorest families, who will spend on average 18% of their income after housing costs on energy bills after April. Energy UK recently warned that household energy bills could rise by another £1,000 by October as wholesale gas prices continue to soar, with households facing the prospect of bills between £2,500 and £3,000 this year. Consumer prices, as measured by the consumer prices index, were 5.5% higher in December 2021 than a year before, the highest inflation rate recorded since 1992. And of course we must not forget that the Bank of England increased interest rates from 0.25% to 0.5% and forecasts that real household disposable incomes are set to fall by 2%.

The UK Government's "Health and Social Care Levy" police paper claims:

"This levy provides a UK-wide approach which enables us to pool and share risks and resources across the UK".

In accepting that, we should be absolutely clear about whom the risks are being pooled among. We must be in no doubt whatsoever that the upcoming national insurance hike is a tax on jobs as well as on individuals, when people are already suffering. The increase will not touch property income, pensions or income from savings, but will fall squarely on the shoulders of those who are salaried or whose income is drawn from profits.

We have heard about figures showing that the top proportion are paying higher amounts, but we would expect that. What I am interested in is the marginal rate of tax, because that is the true measure of fairness—how much of someone's income they are having to give over as a result of a taxation measure. Let us look at one group in particular: our students. This national insurance hike will mean that, if student loan repayments are included, graduates earning just over £27,000 will pay a marginal tax rate in excess of 42%. We have heard that government is about choices and it is clear from the choices this Government are making that the combined effect of their policies will hit the lowest earners, the youngest earners and those with the least economic assets the hardest.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is asserting that the poorest will be worst hit by this, but Treasury analysis of the impact of tax and spending decisions on households in '22-23 in cash terms clearly shows that the bottom eight deciles—80% of households—will be better off as a result of the Government's combined tax and spend decisions, including on national insurance. What does the hon. Gentleman say to that?

Richard Thomson: I say that I very much doubt that, and there is analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies that suggests very differently, but again this comes back to the marginal rate of tax and there is no doubt that this is going to have a greater impact on the marginal rate of low earners than that of higher earners.

Richard Graham: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Richard Thomson: I would like to make some progress.

Richard Graham: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member has made some very good points but I do believe he has inadvertently misled the House by claiming that those who are least well-paid will be paying the most on the tax when we have just heard from the Chief Secretary that over 6 million earners will not be contributing a penny towards the cost of the national increase rise. Mr Deputy Speaker, may I give the hon. Member, through your offices, the opportunity to withdraw his earlier remark?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): That sounds like a debating point as opposed to a point for the Chair.

Richard Thomson: Again, I refer the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) to the concept of the marginal rate of tax and ask him to look at the totality of the impact—if he had been patient I would have happily given way; he had no need to resort to such devices.

On raising additional resources for health and social care, as we are invited to believe this levy is supposed to do, it is surely much fairer as a general principle to spread the burden by increasing income taxes across the board on both earned and unearned income, as well as to look again at areas such as inheritance taxes and capital gains, so that the totality of the wealth of the nation can be taken into consideration in sharing the burden. There is a real danger in my view, particularly as a result of localised property price inflation, that this policy will further widen economic, social, generational and geographical divides, baking that unfairness into the social and economic settlement for decades to come. We have a Government who like to talk the language of levelling up while doing the exact opposite on personal and business taxation. We will be paying the costs of that in reduced growth and lower incomes for many years to come.

That is the problem from a social justice perspective, but it is almost every bit as bad from a policy making perspective. Apart from moneys going to the NHS in England and an unspecified amount eventually trickling through to social care in England, we still have only the sketchiest idea of what this resource will be invested in. There are significant whole-system problems in health and social care in England which predate covid. That is not to say things are great everywhere else, but I get

[Richard Thomson]

absolutely no sense that the UK Government have started to embrace the systemic issues that cause the blockages and poorer outcomes that are there and that money will only go so far to solve, including the high levels of unmet need, staff shortages and poor workforce pay and conditions, as well as the fragile provider market. In that sense, the Government are doing what they routinely like to criticise others for and focusing on inputs rather than outcomes, and surely outcomes for people in health and social care should be driving the reform that is needed.

It is not in doubt that there was a pre-covid pandemic crisis in health and social care, let alone the post-covid one, but that will not be remediated either by this policy or by the Prime Minister's utterly bogus repeated claims about building 40 hospitals. Reform requires thought as well as resource, but surely fairness demands that the resource for that reform comes primarily from those with the broadest shoulders and an economy that is able to and is growing sustainably and productively.

I support Scottish independence and want full tax powers for Scotland, and I have no doubt in my mind that an independent Scottish Government would not be using the equivalent of national insurance in such a way for this purpose. Until that changes, we are stuck with and reliant on the Conservatives—out of all character—prioritising the interests of those on lower and middle incomes over the most wealthy.

Anthony Browne *rose*—

Richard Thomson: Go on—give me one last chance.

Anthony Browne: The hon. Member stresses the importance of a sustainably growing economy. Would he like to congratulate the Government on their economic response to covid, which means that we had the fastest growing economy in the G7 last year and are predicted to do so this year? Groups from the International Monetary Fund to the OECD have congratulated them on their response.

Richard Thomson: I do not think that is true, but, even if it was, those economies that fall the furthest rebound the fastest.

We seem to be reliant on the better nature of the Conservative Government—one that sadly is often lacking—with them somehow going against all their instincts to protect the interests of lower and middle-income earners over those of the highest. I shall not be holding my breath on that front.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. As I said earlier, about 15 people want to speak, so Members should be looking towards five to six minutes and not going over that mark.

3.1 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): When we discuss whether we should have the national insurance contribution rise, we ought to look at what we intend to use the money for, because, after all, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) mentioned, it is a hypothecated tax. The Government are looking to

address two crucial elements to improve to our society, which are the covid backlog—currently more than 6 million people are waiting for treatment, of whom 310,000 are waiting for more than a year—and adult social care, where there is a desire widely held by constituents of hon. Members across the House to cap care costs. Such reforms would assist 150,000 people with their care costs at their time of greatest need. There is a degree of consensus that they are good proposals and must happen—we need to spend the money—so the real question is not whether we spend the money but how we pay for them.

Mr Betts: The hon. Member mentioned the 150,000 people who will benefit from the cap on care costs, and they are disproportionately people in more expensive homes. Where in that funding is the help for the 1.5 million people that Age Concern has assessed should be entitled to social care but have now been excluded from the provisions?

Jerome Mayhew: The hon. Member made a number of interventions on the Minister, and I refer him to the full responses that were given.

The question that I take from that is: how we will pay for the proposals? It seems to me that there can be only three answers. We can take money from other priorities in Government, we can borrow, or we can increase taxation. So far, I have heard no suggestions of other areas of Government spending that should be reduced. The Opposition typically move to defence spending as a simple way of extracting money for other commitments, but that is unlikely to be an area of future reductions in today's environment; in fact, I submit that it will be the opposite.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): The hon. Member is seeking suggestions. What does he think about the £8.7 billion of personal protective equipment that has been incinerated and gone up in flames? Surely nobody in their right mind would suggest that that is a good use of public money. Is it not possible to claw back some of those costs from the suppliers, if indeed the supplies were defective?

Jerome Mayhew: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his intervention. I suggest that a very good use of public money was emergency funding for PPE when we most desperately needed it in a national lockdown. It was inevitable that there would be a trade-off between speed—everyone in the House was cheering the Government on at the time—and maximising the effectiveness of every single contract. I hope that the Government make no apology for the speed with which they dealt with the crisis. They should be commended for that.

It has also been suggested that we should crack down on fraud. The hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) referenced a £4.7 billion headline in covid-related fraud, but she failed to give the Government credit for the actions that they have taken to address that. We have the Taxpayer Protection Taskforce, which has recruited 1,265 staff. We also have the work done on powers for the Insolvency Service and Companies House to link company directors directly to their bounce back loans, which has been used on 61,758 companies, catching loans worth £2.1 billion. The combination of those two factors means that the new estimate, which she did not

find time to refer to, is not £4.7 billion but £3.3 billion. Fraud is therefore reduced to an estimated 7.5% of contracts, which is at least within spitting distance of the average for Government programmes of, I am sorry to say, as much as 5%.

Anthony Browne: My hon. Friend makes a valid point about the need to increase spending to pay for social care and has raised the different ways of doing that. Does he agree that if we are to increase spending sustainably, we need a sustainable source of money and that a one-off windfall that occurs in just one year cannot fund long-term commitments? Cutting back on fraud in one particular year cannot fund long-term commitments.

Jerome Mayhew: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Even if we recovered all of that £3.3 billion, that would be for a single year only. The great mistake that the Opposition have made is to conflate single events—a windfall tax is another example—with ongoing revenue needs.

The next option is to borrow money. Of course, that is the easy response, and that really is the Opposition's position, even if they cannot bring themselves to admit it from the Dispatch Box. However, that is not free money, because we have to service the debt and, eventually, we have to repay it. So we are passing the responsibility on to our children and our grandchildren for tax cuts now, which is essentially what the Labour party is arguing for. Our servicing of debt already cost an estimated £64 billion last year, which is £955 for every single member of the population. Because of inflation, which is a global phenomenon, and the likely rise in interest rates, that is forecast to rise to £75 billion for this financial year. The hon. Member for Leeds West says that the Government have a policy of buy now, pay later, but what could be a better description of Labour's response to this pressing need? We want to improve social care, and we need to have a covid fightback, and we have got to pay for it.

There is the option to borrow, but, as I said, it is our children and grandchildren who will pay that price. I therefore believe that the Government are quite right to balance the increased social spending that we want to achieve with the tax necessary to pay for it. If we look at the total measures that the Government have brought in, we see that they are deeply progressive. Treasury analysis shows that they are net positive for 80% of households, whereas Labour's plan to remove the national insurance contribution would actually help the top 10% the most—by more than £1,000. Surely that is not Labour's policy.

No Conservative Government want to raise tax, but it is our duty before cheap popularity to be responsible custodians of national finances. That is a lesson that Labour has never learned.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am afraid that I will have to put a time limit on speeches of six minutes; otherwise, it will not be fair on others.

3.9 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I rise to support the motion from my right hon. and hon. Friends. We all remember too well that during the

2019 general election campaign, just over two years ago, the Prime Minister said to voters:

“Read my lips, we will not be raising taxes on income or VAT or national insurance.”

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was also keen to point out that his plan was to cut taxes for the lowest paid through cutting national insurance. It is clear that the Government have blatantly broken their promises to the country on national insurance, as they have on international development and the pension triple lock.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), the shadow Chancellor, mentioned, things have changed in the six months since the national insurance contributions increase was announced back in September. It is clear to many Opposition Members that the Government need to rethink the planned rise in national insurance contributions. In these extraordinarily difficult times, if the rise goes ahead, it will see people's incomes squeezed even more. People are finding it more and more difficult just to survive and that is before we see the increase in national insurance contributions and the huge increase in energy bills that will have a heavy impact from April.

In my constituency and across the country, we are all hearing stories of huge sacrifice. Families are facing a real cost of living crisis, with energy bills set to rise again in April—

Anthony Browne: Will the hon. Member give way?

Gerald Jones: No, I will not. Given that oil and gas producers in the North sea have posted huge profits during the pandemic, why do the Government not halt their unfair tax rise, back a windfall tax to help to fund a cut in VAT on home energy bills and ease the burden on working people?

Government Members have also called on the Government not to go ahead with the rise. They have urged Ministers to make tackling the cost of living their No. 1 priority and noted that this year will be exceptionally hard for families, so why are the Government still not listening?

The Government claim that this situation is down to the pandemic, but in March last year—a year into the pandemic—the Chancellor promised that national insurance would not go up, saying:

“We're not going to raise the rates of income tax, national insurance, or VAT.”

He added:

“Nobody's take home pay will be less than it is now”—another broken promise.

Analysis from the New Economics Foundation shows that 2.5 million working households will be hit by the Tory double whammy of cuts to universal credit and the increase in national insurance, losing out on as much as £1,170 next year. That is all at a time when we know that the price of food, the price of petrol and the cost of rent are going up and families are genuinely fearful about making ends meet.

There are other ways to raise that money, but the Chancellor wants the country to believe that this is the only way to do it. Half of Britons say that they could not afford an additional £50 a month on their cost of living. The Government should halt the national insurance rise so that people see their cost of living concerns ease.

[Gerald Jones]

Surely the Minister recognises that stopping the rise would provide immediate support and help families at this really difficult time.

We know that citizens advice bureaux have seen a huge increase in debt advice services and that is before we reach April, when there will be the national insurance rise and the increase in energy costs. Labour has long called for the national insurance rise to be halted so that it does not make the cost of living crisis worse.

Anthony Browne: Will the hon. Member give way?

Gerald Jones: No, I will not. The Federation of Small Businesses warned that

“this increase will stifle recruitment, investment and efforts to upskill and improve productivity in the years ahead.”

The trade unions have joined the FSB in that regard. The FSB stated:

“The Government’s regressive jobs tax hike will put jobs at risk, stifle start-ups and prevent new jobs from being created...It could mean 50,000 more people out of work after it takes effect in April. That means 50,000 livelihoods harmed—50,000 people who would otherwise be at work in our economy.”

The TUC also says that it is wrong to hit young and low-paid workers while “leaving the wealthy untouched”.

Surely the Government must recognise that we are in a totally different situation from when the rise was announced six months ago. The economic outlook for thousands of families across the country is much bleaker, so I urge the Government to change course, support today’s Opposition motion and help to ease the pressure on families in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney and right across the country.

3.13 pm

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Opposition are right that the rise in the cost of living is a crisis causing pain for many households across the country, particularly those on low incomes. As I said in an intervention, this is a global issue. The inflation afflicting the UK afflicts almost every country around the world. The energy price rises and the rise in food costs are as a result of global phenomena that are affecting countries such as US and Germany, where inflation is far higher than it is in the UK. In fact, if we look on an international basis, we see that inflation here is pretty middle of the road, although it is very concerning.

I will tell the House what else is very serious, as well as the cost of living crisis: the waiting list crisis that we have after the pandemic, with 6 million people waiting for elective surgery. There is also the social care crisis, which has bedevilled Governments for decades. They have always put it in on the “too difficult to do” pile and not done anything about it. We need to tackle those really serious issues and they require a serious, sustained increase in funding. The question is: how do we do that? How do we get that amount of money?

The national insurance increase will raise about £12 billion a year, when we do all the sums and cut out the costs. We can raise that amount of money only from three sorts of taxes: national insurance, VAT or income tax. If we put this on VAT, there would be an increase in the cost of living. That would go straight through to inflation.

The windfall tax that the Opposition propose would raise £6 billion or so, which is half the amount and would just be for one year. That cannot pay for a sustained increase in social care funding and the waiting list backlog. The question that I was going to ask if I had been allowed to intervene earlier, including on the shadow Chancellor, the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves)—I notice that she has disappeared from her own debate, which is interesting—[*Interruption.*] It is the Opposition’s debate, not ours. I was going to ask how the Opposition would sustainably raise £12 billion a year to pay for the NHS. As I understand it, the Labour party has no solution to or proposal for that. Labour’s proposal to cut national insurance therefore basically amounts to a tax cut to starve the NHS of much-needed funding. I am astonished that the Labour party, of all parties, which likes to see itself as the party of the NHS, is proposing to do that.

We could ask, “Why choose national insurance rather than income tax?” There are various reasons for that. One of the most powerful is that it would be half paid for by businesses—there would be 1.25% for employees and 1.25% for businesses—whereas income tax is paid directly by earners.

National insurance is also progressive. I find it alarming when Labour Members keep saying that it is not. I wonder what understanding of economics they have. A progressive tax means that those on higher incomes pay more. That is clearly the case with national insurance. The top 14% will pay 50% of the whole tax. It is a tax that Labour increased in 2003 to pay for healthcare.

There are problems with national insurance. It does not normally go on dividends or on pensions, but this increase will, and it addresses a lot of the inequities of normal national insurance. Unlike income tax, national insurance can also be—and indeed, is—ringfenced legally and operationally for the NHS, so that we can be sure that this money is going towards the systemic problem of healthcare and social care that I mentioned earlier.

It is clearly important to tackle the cost of living. I completely understand Opposition Members’ concerns about raising taxes. I see myself as a low-tax Conservative, and I do not vote for tax rises with any joy in my heart, but what the Government have done is give support on household bills directly through the £200 energy bill support scheme—the rebate—and the £150 off council tax for houses in bands A to D. Eighty per cent. of houses will benefit from that, and the total package is about £9 billion a year. That goes directly to people’s pockets from April onwards. They will notice it straight away, and people want immediate support, not long-term aspiration.

I find this whole debate quite beguiling. I have spent my adult life watching the Labour party argue for higher taxes to fund the NHS. Today, in this debate, Labour Members are arguing for lower taxes in order to starve the NHS of money. This whole debate is about not the opportunities for the NHS but political opportunism, and I do not think it brings any credit on the Labour party to be so flagrantly opportunistic and economically illiterate as it is being today.

3.19 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I place on record my dismay that the Government have chosen to hit working people and businesses with a

national insurance rise at the worst possible time—when one in six working households cannot make ends meet, according to the Institute for Public Policy Research; when the number of jobs that pay below the national minimum wage and the living wage is still more than two and a half times higher than at pre-pandemic levels; when inflation is forecast to reach 7.25% next month, the highest level since August 1991.

We already have the highest level of inflation for three decades, but I am afraid that everything we know about the implications of Ukraine tells us that it will only get higher in the next few months. Everywhere we turn, prices are going up far faster than anyone can keep up with—at the supermarket checkout, at the petrol pump, in gas and electricity bills. Adding in mortgage rises, rent rises and council tax rises, we face a perfect storm of inflationary pressures that we have not seen for an entire generation.

I do not think that anyone has really levelled with the public about what the implications of a protracted war in Ukraine will be for prices. Things are going to get a lot more difficult before the pressure eases off. Just look at how the mere suggestion of a boycott of Russian gas and oil has pushed trading prices sky-high. That resulted from comments from the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, that conversations about a boycott were taking place—one can only imagine what would happen if people moved beyond conversations and a boycott actually took place.

It is not clear to what extent the price spikes are being exacerbated by speculators who are seeking to take advantage of the situation. Nor do we know whether a real effort by OPEC countries to increase production would mitigate it, or what impact the conflict will have on food prices over the medium term. The reality is that western Europe, trapped by its reliance on Russian energy, is forced to buy fuel that pays for the war that pushes up the price of energy further still. I fear that until more home truths are spoken about what it will take to break the cycle, we will continue to see prices rise and the war continue.

I recognise that addressing the issue is not solely within the Government's gift. Grasping the nettle will be a continent-wide effort, but we must look at what the Government can control. There is an opportunity today to act on the national insurance increases. It beggars belief that we are looking at tax rises at the same time as prices are rising and bills are skyrocketing at levels not seen for a generation. This is the wrong tax at the wrong time.

Anthony Browne: Will the hon. Member give way?

Justin Madders: I am sorry, but the hon. Member has just spoken. If he did not get his point in then, he has missed his opportunity.

The tax rise was wrong back in September when it was first proposed, and even more wrong now. That is not just the view of Opposition Members; the cross-party Treasury Committee has highlighted that the increase in national insurance contributions for employers will lead to higher costs being passed on to consumers. If we speak to anyone in social care, they tell us that that is pushing them into unviability.

Data from the Institute of Directors in January demonstrated that more than a third of businesses would respond to the increase by raising prices and

passing on the burden to customers, yet again increasing inflationary pressures. The same report also said that nearly a fifth of businesses would consider employing fewer staff as a result of these rises. Almost three quarters of companies in manufacturing say that they are also very likely to pass on the costs to customers, so it is no surprise that Make UK has said that the proposal is “illogical” and “ill-timed”.

We know that some areas will be worse hit than others. Analysis shows that the north-east and the midlands—areas that rely on wages rather than income from investment and properties—will be hardest hit. That is not levelling up, is it? Trapping the country in a low-growth, high-tax cycle and hitting working people with tax rise after tax rise is the opposite of levelling up.

Within four years, the average household will be paying £3,000 a year more in tax than when the Prime Minister first came to power. There is nothing to give families the security that they would get from the fully funded measures that the Opposition have proposed to keep energy bills down, which would be paid for by a windfall tax on North sea oil and gas producer profits. In my constituency alone, 12,500 families would be £400 better off as a result of the tax, and our plan would mean almost all households making savings on their bills. Nor would an extra £40 charge be hidden away and come out of people's bills in a few years' time, regardless of whether they had benefited from the scheme in the first place.

We see the effects of the current crisis playing out every day. One example in my constituency relates to housing affordability. Housing is a basic right, but with affordable and council housing in short supply, reliance upon the private rented sector has increased. However, a recent search of properties available in Ellesmere Port showed that of the 13 properties available—a minuscule number to start with—only two came within a rental liability level that would be covered by the local housing allowance, while the rest ranged from £30 to £225 over the rates. In Neston, the results of a search are even worse: all the properties were well over the LHA. In fact, it is now incredibly rare to see any properties offered at a rental value equivalent to the LHA. How on earth can we expect people to put a roof over their head in that situation, let alone pay for energy bills, food or council tax bills?

This will be an ongoing crisis, and there is no solution from the Government. Everywhere we turn, from housing to heating to eating, prices are going up. People face some really tough times ahead unless something is done now. Let us not add to that impossible burden. Let us scrap this national insurance increase right now.

3.24 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I have said many times in this place that I represent the oldest demographic in the entire country. Hon. Members might expect me to say that North Norfolk is beautiful; it is my home and it is where I grew up. People come to live there all their lives, retire there or come back for years and years. If I knock on a door, there are two things that my constituents say they care about. They care about their health, and they recognise that with the dreadful situation we are in, the conflict we are seeing and the shifting of geopolitical plates, we have to have a competent Government looking after the economy. In

[Duncan Baker]

pretty much any polling across the country, the most important factors that people care about are their health and the economy.

As I said in my intervention on the Chief Secretary, we have spent £450 billion, an eye-watering amount, on safeguarding the jobs and livelihoods of millions and millions of people—working-class, everyday people whose jobs have been saved. As a consequence, we are now in £2.2 trillion or so of debt. I find it staggering that the Opposition think that we can just amble out the other side of a global pandemic and everything will be normal. It simply cannot be, and we must and should be honest about it.

The health and social care levy is needed. We have heard all the statistics that show why: to repair the backlog in elective surgery and repair the social care system that we need in this country. According to reports, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) said, £12 billion a year is needed—a colossal amount of money. We cannot raise £12 billion a year by making savings or cuts to other services that have been ravaged throughout the pandemic that we have just come through.

Social care is a subject that I have spoken about many times in this Chamber—obviously I would, with the demographic I represent. We should not underestimate the herculean efforts of our carers. It is completely right that we hail our nurses through the pandemic. Imagine the care and patience someone needs to be a dementia nurse or a palliative carer. It is about time we fixed that—it is about time we grabbed the nettle and did it. This is a Government who are finally gutsy enough not to be derailed, no matter how difficult the situation. They will not be pushed off track; they will deal with it.

Before I came to the House I was a finance director, and I remember that when automatic enrolment came in, the situation was very similar. The initial levy was 1%, and what was being said then was what is being said now—people would be desperately worried about the cost, they would not pay for it, and they would opt out. What happened? Ninety per cent. of people stayed in the scheme, because they saw the value of what it was doing in the context of the marginal extra amount that they were paying.

The same will happen in this case. No one wants to see tax rises—we all agree on that—but the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. If we end up funding services properly and taking care of our elderly people properly—and we have the opportunity now to reform the social care sector and fund the NHS in this way—the 1.25% about which Members are so concerned today will dissipate, and for that reason we have to be entirely sensible.

Anthony Browne: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case for the need to increase spending on health and social care in the long run. Does he share my concern about the fact that, while proposing a cut in national insurance, Labour Members have no answer to the question of how they would fund ongoing health and social care services, and the fact that cutting national insurance would inevitably lead to their cutting those as well?

Duncan Baker: This is the great problem in the House: we are constantly being told that what we are doing is wrong, but there are never many opportunities to ask, “What would you do?”, and that is the case again today. Yes, we have heard about the one-off windfall tax on the energy companies, but that has been dismissed for very good reasons. If anyone is able to come up with a sustainable way in which we can generate £12 billion to improve the situation that we are discussing today, I should very much like to sit here for the rest of the afternoon in order to hear it.

3.30 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I want to speak about quite a few matters, but first I want to focus in the plight of younger people—and by “younger people”, I mean people under 40, not just people in their 20s. I am talking about everyone in that younger slice of the population.

We have talked about the last massive increase in inflation, which, in 1992, reached the same levels of increase that it has reached in recent times. I am 35; in 1992 I was six, and I did not know what the rate of inflation was because it did not really matter to me. For a significant period I have been living in a property that does not belong to my parents, and I have a 10-year-old and an eight-year-old. There are many, many people like me out there, people who have been living their lives and paying their bills and have never seen an inflation rate like this, have never seen the increases that are coming down the line, and have never felt the massive squeeze that we are feeling now.

This is a cost of living crisis, one that is unprecedented for members of my generation who are having to face these massive costs, and it is compounded by the UK Government’s terribly poor decisions. It is compounded by the fact that people in Scotland must pay massive fees for attending university in England. It is compounded by the fact that people will be paying off student loans throughout their lives; indeed, they will never be able to pay them off. It is compounded by the fact that we do not have a real living wage, and that is even worse for people who are younger than 23 or 25, because the UK Government refuse to provide a single living wage. The “national living wage” is a pretend living wage, because people cannot actually live on it. The Government refuse to provide a single set rate, apparently believing that somehow a 20-year-old can survive on less food or less electricity than someone older.

It is ridiculous that the Government are doing this. People my age and younger do not have savings on which to rely. As I said in the House some years ago, the average household has less than £100 in savings—and that was pre-covid, before the period during which people’s incomes have been so massively squeezed. People my age—younger people, people under 40—cannot just dip into their savings in order to fund the massive increase in energy bills that is coming, and the massive increase that is coming as a result of the national insurance hike. This is the least sensible time to be introducing a national insurance hike. People will be paying a massive amount more purely because of the choices of this Government—purely because the Government are choosing to fund health and social care in this way.

We in Scotland went into the 2019 election spending more per head of population on our NHS than the UK Government was. We went into that election calling for

the UK to up its spending on the NHS. In Scotland, we are making different choices. We are making better choices. We are already funding the NHS at a higher level per head of population than England is, and we are already increasing the Scottish child payment to make sure that the number of children in poverty is decreasing. The Resolution Foundation says that the UK Parliament

“is on track to be the worst parliament on record for income growth”.

I do not want to see a world being created by this Tory Government where my children's generation will be poorer than my generation and where my generation are poorer than my parent's generation, but the UK Government continue to bake that in.

If the UK Government want to make money and reduce public sector net debt, a great way to do that is through immigration. In 2016-17, migrants reduced public sector borrowing by £4.4 billion. We would get to £450 billion pretty quickly if we added up the amount of positive benefits we can get from migration. If we made better choices—if we chose to not spend money on weapons of mass destruction, for example—we could have more money to spend on the NHS. We should be making better choices that reflect and assist the wellbeing of the population. This is a political choice. The Government have been asking people at the bottom of the pile for more than a decade to just pay a little bit more and cope a little bit more with austerity for a little bit longer, and now they are in the midst of a cost of living crisis where families' energy bills are going to be shooting through the roof next month, with a £639 increase a year for every household.

In that time, the UK Government are ploughing ahead with this increase on national insurance. This is going to compound the increases that are being put in place. The increase will be nowhere near covered by the Government's increase to the national living wage or by the universal credit taper rate. None of that will cover the cost that my constituents are being asked to pay to fund something that could be funded from somewhere else. The UK Government are choosing to balance the books on the backs of the poorest constituents that we have, and they need to change track now.

3.36 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The idea of trying to raise a specific allocated funding source for social care came from a report in 2018 jointly done by then Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee—it has changed his name so many times, I have to think what it was called at the time—and the Health and Social Care Committee. We raised the idea of a national insurance increase but we were very specific about the caveats. We said that no one under 40 should pay it, because young people have been disproportionately hit by the impact of the banking crisis, the austerity measures and then covid. That is exactly the same way the Japanese raise their funding for social care. We said that the threshold at which people start paying national insurance should be higher, which this proposal does not do, and that the ceiling should be raised, which I think the Government now accept should be done. We also said that people on a high private pension should pay, but there is no proposal from the Government for that.

The Government are saying that when the levy comes in formally next year, people of pensionable age who are working will pay, but for this next year, 2022-23, those of pensionable age will not pay anything at all for the national insurance rise, which seems particularly strange as the money that will be spent will disproportionately help older people. We also said that people who are getting unearned income should pay. The self-employed pay national insurance based on their profits but not on a whole range of self-employed income, which would be a very different tax—a very different premium indeed. The changes to the cap will disproportionately benefit people in the most expensive homes, who will pay less of their asset when they die than people with lower value homes. We said that, rather than deal with this convoluted arrangement with the cap, everyone above a certain threshold of home value should pay a percentage of that asset towards the social care premium on their death. That again would be a much fairer way to raise money.

What we have here is a regressive form of taxation. I accept that people at the lower end—the people at the very bottom—on a £10,000 income will not pay, but beyond that, the hit to family incomes is going to be much greater for a family earning £30,000 than for a family earning £130,000. And at the end of the day, this does not deliver more money for social care. It should not be called a social care premium. It delivers the money through the disproportionate raising of the cap, which I have explained. It does not give any extra money for councils to fund the gap in social care funding, which has grown wider over the last 10 years. As social care funding has gone up and council budgets have shrunk, the amount for other services has shrunk with cuts of up to 50%—the National Audit Office has done an excellent report on this—whether it be planning services, environmental services, bus services, libraries or road repairs. We are looking for a funding stream that will stop that happening. There is no more money for local authorities to provide social care to the 1.5 million people that Age UK believes would have been entitled to social care 15 years ago and do not get it now.

At the same time, we will see a disproportionate rise in national insurance premiums hitting some of the poorest families hardest. What else will the Government do to fund local councils? They will make sure that councils have to put up council tax by around 3%. Council tax is a disproportionately unfair tax for poorer families. Look at the relationship between the value of homes and the amount of council tax people pay. The Resolution Foundation did a very interesting analysis five years ago showing that the level of council tax paid by those at the top end was 3.3 times higher than those at the bottom end, but the value of homes was, on average, 6.8 times higher at the top end, and that gap has grown larger as the value of houses has grown over the years and there has not been a council tax revaluation since 1991.

We have a double whammy. On top of the increases in food and fuel prices, which are disproportionately hitting poorer families, we have a disproportionate national insurance rise and disproportionate council tax increases, too. The Government should stand back and consider how we fund social care properly and fairly on a long-term basis, while at the same time addressing the problems of unfairness in council tax through revaluation and reconsidering the bands so that people in lower-value

[Mr Clive Betts]

homes do not pay a disproportionate amount of council tax compared with people in higher-value properties. That would be fair. Let us see some fairness from the Government in addressing our future funding needs. They should not continue with the national insurance rise and the council tax increase this year, as they disproportionately hit the poorest families hardest.

3.42 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who spoke powerfully about a number of the challenges facing households across the country. I particularly support his comments about the inadequacy of the council tax regime. I very much hope that the work of the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru will bring about a more progressive system, at least as it relates to Wales.

I urge the Government to cancel the planned national insurance increase. If they cannot bring themselves to do so, they should at least postpone its implementation. It has been said a number of times in this debate, but it is worth repeating, that now is not the time to place a further cost on families and businesses. The hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) mentioned in her opening remarks that when the facts change, so should our policies. It is worth repeating that the situation in which we find ourselves is drastically different from last week, let alone last year. It is important that the Government consider that fact.

The cost of living crisis has been well discussed this afternoon. Inflation is surging and could exceed 8% in the coming months, if some estimates are correct, as energy, food and other essentials become even more expensive. The situation is especially acute in rural areas like mine in Ceredigion, where rising fuel and energy prices are inflicting a heavy toll on household finances. Nearly a fifth of households in Wales are not connected to the gas grid, and in rural areas like Ceredigion the figure can be as high as 80%, meaning they are completely unprotected from spikes in energy prices. Indeed, constituents of mine have seen the price of heating oil treble since September, and many have been informed this week that delivery to our area is currently unavailable. With rural fuel poverty already at some 14%, I fear for my constituents if the situation continues. I support the Bill proposed by the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), which would at least bring off-grid homes into some sort of regulatory arrangement that would mitigate them in respect of some of the more volatile differences in the energy market. Rising energy costs are matched by rising fuel costs, and in rural areas the lack of public transport infrastructure forces many to be dependent on private car use. Some 80% of commuters depend on the car, so it is a real concern when pump prices increase by some 10p a litre in a matter of days. I have been told that some stations in my constituency have seen increases of 15% or even 20% in the past week or so.

That is why the proposed national insurance hike, which will increase tax on average earnings in Wales by more than £250, is so mistimed. Wales already has the highest poverty and child poverty rate among the four nations of the UK, with almost one in four people, and

31% of our children, living in poverty. As we face potentially the worst drop in living standards in more than half a century or, as the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) said so clearly and eloquently, in a generation, households can ill-afford this tax hike and neither can our businesses. From Brexit to covid, with all the corresponding supply chain disruption, loss of business and inflationary pressures, there is growing evidence that businesses just cannot withstand further pressure. Indeed, there is a risk that by increasing national insurance contributions, the Chancellor will increase the cost of employment, which will be reflected either in job losses or in even higher prices to the consumer down the line. We need targeted relief, perhaps through a reformed rural fuel duty relief scheme, to help with costs for the motorists in my area, who do not have the luxury of public transport infrastructure to use just to go to the shop or to attend work every day. This would help hard-pressed communities weather this crisis, rather than what the Government propose to do, which is to increase the tax on them.

The decision to increase national insurance contributions is a choice, and we have heard a lot about that this afternoon; politics is always about making difficult choices. People across Ceredigion have told me loudly and clearly that this is the wrong choice for the situation in which we find ourselves.

3.47 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): The Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Resolution Foundation have both said that the NI rise is disproportionately loaded on to younger and lower-paid workers compared with a rise in income tax. In addition, inflation is expected to hit at least 7.25% in April, council tax is going up in most places and energy prices are expected to rise by a whopping 50%. Of course the Government will say that they have offered support in the form of a £200 energy "discount" that consumers must pay back over the next five years, but that is, in essence, loading even more debt onto cash-strapped households. Labour's analysis shows that, combined with the £444 increase in energy bills expected next financial year for a household that gets the Chancellor's loan and council tax scheme, most households will still be more than £1,000 worse off in 2022-23. I must impress on the Minister that it is not just households who will be devastated by this NICs rise; businesses are also warning of the effects it will have on them and on the overall economy. For example, Make UK says:

"The cost burden on business is continuing to escalate and, while some of these increases are due to global events, Government must avoid shooting business in the foot with an entirely self-imposed decision."

The Federation of Small Businesses says that the Government must reverse this decision and go further, removing all employer contributions for apprentices, which it says will result in more workplace opportunities for young people.

So today's motion is right: the Government must cancel their planned NICs rise, because it is clear that these reforms are illogical and unfair. On unfairness, for those paid a wage above the NICs threshold, which is due to be £9,880 from April, the Government will ask for an extra 2.5% of wages towards the costs of social care, because the 1.25 percentage point increase to both employee and employer NICs will each come out of

workers' take-home pay in the end. Those who are self-employed and paid in dividends have been asked to contribute an extra 1.25 percentage points from their wages, but if a person's income is derived from interest payments, rents, capital gains or pension annuity, they will not see any increase at all. Happy days for them.

It is clear that our social care system needs urgent reform and investment, but raising national insurance contributions at just the time when our communities and businesses need to be shielded from the cost of living crisis they face is not the answer. At the very least, the Government must cut the rate of VAT for household energy bills as soon as possible and must levy a long-overdue windfall tax on oil and gas companies to generate an income stream. They must expand and increase the warm home discount, prevent the cost of supplier failure from going on to bills and significantly increase universal credit to offset soaring inflation. They must also increase public sector pay and the living wage.

The Government must address the long-term structural failures that the privatisation of our energy market has caused by recognising that public ownership is central to addressing the costs and energy security crisis that our energy system faces and would also create a revenue stream, just like the revenue streams created by countries such as France with their own publicly owned energy companies.

We are long overdue a frank discussion and examination of fairness in the tax and social security system. We must look at taxing income from wealth—such as interest, rent and capital gains—on a basis comparable with that for earnings from work. As the New Economics Foundation has suggested, the Government should examine the idea of a living income, which would link social security payments to a decent minimum income guarantee.

This is the time for the Government to wrap their arms around households and businesses, not to hit them with an illogical tax hike. Only when households and businesses are supported will they be able to emerge from this cost of living crisis stronger and more buoyant than they were before.

3.52 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): In an intervention earlier, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place, talked about the 1.25 percentage point increase having the potential to break the back of families—being the last straw, as it were—and he was right. I often look across at Government Members and wonder whether they have any capacity for understanding the pressures that families face. Under a previous leader they used to talk about the just about managing, but those who were just about managing—the JAM—are toast under the circumstances that people currently face. On International Women's Day, we should spare a thought for those mothers who are already struggling—now, before the increase comes in—to feed their children and heat their homes.

The Office for National Statistics says that those who earn below the average wage will pay up to £255 a year. That is a significant amount of money for people who do not have it. If someone's household budget is already blown, £255 a year is devastating. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) pointed out the disproportionate effect of the national insurance increase on young people and the lowest-paid, and that

is the case, but it will also hit business. The Federation of Small Businesses has pointed out that the increase will affect businesses by, on average, around £3,000 per year. It says that will put the brakes on investment, upskilling, apprenticeships and, of course, community growth.

Government Members like to say that Brexit has nothing to do with the crisis we are currently in but the ONS points out that since Brexit—incidentally, a Brexit that Scotland did not vote for and roundly rejected—the cost of producing goods has gone up by 13%. That is forcing up prices, increasing inflation and sucking the oxygen out of exports. Some 4,300 fewer businesses are exporting now than were exporting in 2019. That is a shocking figure. These are UK companies that are no longer exporting. Their exports to the EU are down £20 billion. All of this means less money in the economy and less money getting through to our communities—especially in Scotland and especially in places such as the highlands and the north of Scotland where we rely on Europe for fishing, seafood, fruit and veg and clothing. Many small and medium-sized enterprises are losing market and money. It is no wonder that the FSB has described this act as “chilling”.

This national insurance increase, which will stall planned wage increases, comes on top of household pressures gradually crushing ordinary households across the nations of the UK. As the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) pointed out, rural constituencies are disproportionately affected. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has pointed out that we are seeing inflation of 8%, but for basic foodstuffs it is even higher. Things such as margarine are up 45%. Rice, one of the cheapest foods, has seen an increase of 344%. These are real effects on real people in real households, and they will be facing these pressures every day.

In the colder climate in rural areas, the costs are higher for fuel and for transport. For those in off-gas grid areas, it is not only about the £800 increase—as it was. It will now be more. It may cost £2,000 a year for the average household, but it could be £4,300 a year for energy costs. That is an astonishingly hard bill to pay for people who do not have a lot of money. This is another straw that will hurt them. An often used phrase is that people have to choose between heating or eating. Many of my constituents do not have that choice any more. They cannot choose the heating because there is just no money for it in the budget. People are being pushed into extreme fuel poverty and actual poverty, and they no longer have a choice.

The Government should scrap the national insurance hike. The Chancellor's payday loan will not help, as it has to be repaid and, as we have just heard, that just exacerbates the problem. Council tax help is not enough. People need an emergency package. The Government should turn that £200 payday loan back into a grant that is paid to people directly. The £1,040 universal credit cut should be reversed. The Government should adopt the Scottish child payment across the nations of the UK and bring in a real living wage, not the “pretendy” one, as it was called earlier. They should scrap the bedroom tax; Scotland is having to mitigate that at the moment, but it should not be there. Let us scrap it.

I call on Members to support my ten-minute rule Bill to regulate off-grid gas supplies. The Government should make the changes: scrap the benefit cap; take away the hideous rape clause; and remove the barriers so that people are able to afford their very existence.

[Drew Hendry]

There is a lot more that we could cover today. This subject affects people's income, affects their livelihood, affects the development and the growth of their children and affects their families into the future, but there is no time to cover it all. The one thing that this Government could do today, because they know that it is unpopular with their own Back Benchers, is to scrap this national insurance hike.

3.58 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate.

Like the constituents of all Members of this House, my constituents are experiencing a cost of living crisis, but for many in Easington, this is not a new or a temporary crisis. We need only look at food poverty and the normalisation of the use of food banks, many of which have been overwhelmed after a decade of Tory policies. In 2010, the Trussell Trust distributed around 40,000 emergency food parcels; last year, more than 2.5 million parcels were delivered. Shocking though those figures are, they do not even count independent food banks, such as those that operate in my constituency, including the much-valued service run by the East Durham Trust and the Dawdon Community Centre. Those figures, which show the exponential increase in food bank usage, are a sign of economic failure. People should be angry at a growing, Government-imposed cost of living crisis in which millions of families are experiencing hardship, as some of them have for more than a decade now.

There is no doubt about it: the Conservative party is making life harder for ordinary families. As many Opposition Members have said, poverty and policies that lead to increased poverty and inequality are a political choice—a political choice that the Government party has made in this case. Prices are rising: food, energy, fuel, diesel, petrol and housing costs are rising. Government Members were all elected on a promise not to increase taxes, and that includes national insurance contributions, which I understand the Prime Minister himself personally signed off.

We know that the Prime Minister's political promises, whether made at the Dispatch Box or in an election manifesto, are ephemeral. An average worker's income will be cut by more than £250 a year due to this national insurance hike. It will wipe out the council tax rebate that Ministers have referred to, as well as half of the Government's mandatory energy loan.

The majority of my constituents will not see the benefit of capping social care costs because of the relatively low value of their properties. The Government's policies make the poorest pay to protect the assets of the wealthy and the inheritance of the richest in society; I will come back to that in a moment. They will entrench poverty and economic inequality for generations to come.

This is a bad policy and a bad tax for the communities I represent, who face a social care tax double whammy next month. My constituents suffer not only from the policies of the national Conservative Government, but locally from the Tory-led coalition and alliance on

Durham County Council. I quote the Tory leader of the Conservative group, who holds the finance portfolio on the council:

"There is no crisis in adult social care in County Durham. Members must take their information from our council reports and not from primary school level BBC National news reports." We have all been put firmly in our places.

Councillor Bell, I am sad to say, is being supported and facilitated by the Liberal Democrats, the Green party and the independents. They will be raising the council tax adult social care precept by 3% in Durham, despite having been elected on a manifesto promise that there would be zero increase in council tax. My constituents are being hit by two Tory taxes to pay for the cost of social care. Of the national insurance contribution we are discussing, I am not sure any of it will go to social care, but we shall see.

I will pick up on a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) about the inherent unfairness of council tax. That tax disproportionately hits the poorest living in low-value properties. In my Easington constituency, of more than 40,000 hereditaments or properties, 75% are in band A. A home in band A in Easington, valued at £80,000, is paying around £29.75 a week in council tax. In contrast, a Russian oligarch's band H home in Kensington, valued at £125 million, pays just £50.52 a week in council tax. It is a disgrace.

The Government have the wrong priorities, and last night's votes on the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill showed that. We do not need more tax—we need fairer tax. They should scrap the national insurance tax hike, work with me and others and with the Fairer Share campaign to scrap council tax, and support a proportional property tax to counter the cost of living crisis.

4.4 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Having listened to the debate this afternoon, I want to draw the few Members on the Conservative Benches back to what our motion is actually seeking. It is very clear: it is asking the Government to cancel the planned 1.2% rise in national insurance contributions that will cost families, on average, £500 per year from this April. The issues around funding for health and social care, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) outlined, are long-standing. This did not start during covid, and it has not been addressed by this Government for successive years. When 50% of Britons are saying that they cannot afford this additional increase in the cost of living, we are asking the Government to address this and cancel this rise now to support families.

Across my constituency of Vauxhall, the reality of a cost of living crisis is nothing new for many residents. They have been trying to make the pennies last for many years. The ill effects of the universal credit system, the erosion of workers' rights and an utter failure to tackle the housing crisis have left so many Vauxhall residents—

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I would like to ask her about the housing crisis. In my constituency, in Reading and Woodley, many residents suffer, as she says, from the rising cost of living, but they suffer particularly

because of the great increases in mortgage and rental costs. Will she focus on that matter, and will the Minister also look into it?

Florence Eshalomi: My hon. Friend makes a really valid point. In London, the big issue of the cost of living is being pushed up by the cost of our housing crisis, and this is experienced right across the country. Household costs continue to go through the roof, including for many people in insecure tenancies and people in the private rented sector who are also hit hard.

The rise in national insurance will do nothing to alleviate the suffering felt by my constituents but will simply combine with booming fuel prices to push more and more of them into poverty. The effect of this cannot be overstated. More than 8,000 people in Vauxhall already live in fuel poverty. That means that they cannot afford to keep their home warm without dropping into poverty. How have we got to a state where thousands of people in the centre of one of the richest cities in the world, in one of the richest countries in the world, are having to make the impossible choice between living in poverty or living in a cold home? That is the reality for many of my constituents.

The Government can point as much as they want to extenuating circumstances, but they cannot hide from the failures on their own doorstep that have made the events of the past couple of years unnecessarily hard. Neither can it be said that the solutions they offer are sufficient, or progressive enough, in alleviating the costs of households. While the Government have proclaimed to be living with covid, the reality for many people in Vauxhall is that they are still reeling from insufficient support during the pandemic, and local industries face a long tail of this crisis. These include self-employed people who were unfairly excluded from Government support. Many of the people who have contacted me built up personal debt during the pandemic to stay afloat, only to be hit now with the double whammy of the national insurance and energy cost hikes.

In the lead-up to the 2015 general election, the then leader of the Conservative party talked about fixing the roof when the sun is shining. At the same time, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition took a wrecking ball to the effective schemes introduced by Labour that were fixing a million roofs every year. The result is that, with the heavy rain of the fuel price crisis on the horizon, our housing stock still suffers from inefficiencies that will mean that more and more households face impossible choices in the next couple of months.

On this International Women's Day, I pay tribute to the women across Vauxhall who are working around the clock behind the scenes to make ends meet: the women who are juggling insecure zero-hours contract jobs to pay their bills; the women who are forced to return to work early because of the crippling costs of childcare; the women who are at the forefront of working with our young people caught up in violence, running to the scene and reassuring the community when there has been a tragic incident; and the women who will continue to go without just to ensure that their extended family members or the people they are caring for are supported. They are the very same women who will be hit by this national insurance crisis.

The tangibility of many households in Vauxhall's ability to cope is close to a tipping point. While there are things that the Government cannot control, they

must use all the levers they have available to ensure that households stay afloat. Refusing to impose a national insurance rise now is one of those levers, and it is one that the Government must use if they have the interests of households up and down the country at heart. I ask Conservative Members to reassess their commitment to supporting working families and cancel this rise.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We will now have a five-minute time limit so I can get everybody in.

4.9 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Having listened to contributions from across the House this afternoon, as well as extensively reading around this subject, it is indisputable that we are facing the worst cost of living crisis in 30 years. As other Members have said, it is—as always—the poorest in our communities who are going to pay the highest proportion of their income to meet essential needs. In the current climate, the Government should seek to increase people's income, not add extra financial burdens on those who can least afford them. That is what the Welsh Government are trying to do within their financial limitations because, in the words of the Welsh Minister for Social Justice, Jane Hutt:

"We are determined to do all we can to support our people with the bills they are facing".

The solutions, though—as the Bevan Foundation, a well-respected think-tank in Wales, points out—lie with this UK Government, so let us look briefly at some of the facts and figures. Median pay is now at its lowest rate, and real pay is falling. It is not me saying that; the Governor of the Bank of England and the Bank's Monetary Policy Committee have also said so. Real pay is falling, as the Trades Union Congress has said, and social security payments are falling, as the Chancellor has said; indeed, he said so last October when he took £20 in universal credit from those on the lowest incomes in society. The 3.1% ceiling on uprating social security imposed a few weeks ago now looks like a 5% cut, if the Resolution Foundation's inflation predictions are correct.

At the same time, costs are going up. Worst of all, the energy price cap has increased by 54%—almost £700 over the next six months. Food bills are going up, rail fares went up last week, and as others have said, council tax bills are going up. On top of this, next month, the national insurance contributions of both employers and employees are going to increase. As the Resolution Foundation said in October:

"The average combined impact of the freeze to income tax thresholds and the 1.25 per cent increase in personal National Insurance contributions is £600 per household",

and the expected rise in taxes and energy bills will lead to an average £1,200 per year increase in costs for households from April. The Tory Government and the Chancellor are taking money away from working people and small businesses who can least afford it. Others have already eloquently evidenced this, and it is demonstrated by organisations such as the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, which estimates an increase in destitution, and the Office for Budget Responsibility's own data.

I have heard a lot from Government Members about, "Well, what can we do?" This Labour party will keep challenging the Government here in Parliament, but we

[Beth Winter]

will also continue to work with our trade union colleagues. I will continue to stand with trade unions, taking action to defend those on low and middle incomes who are cast aside by this Government. The Chancellor needs to increase Government spending in the Budget to boost investment and allow public services to cope with higher inflation—that is necessary, but not through increases in the cost of living for those on low and middle incomes. We need to shift the burden to those who can afford it, which requires major interventions in the economy at the spring statement.

We have heard calls for a major additional benefit uprating, with which I fully agree. We also need to hear proposals for significantly increasing the national minimum wage—I support a £15 minimum wage—and for taxing wealth. There are lots of ways of doing that, such as a windfall tax on North sea oil and gas; a one-off wealth tax, as advocated by the Wealth Tax Commission; an increase in capital gains tax, as proposed by the Trades Union Congress; progressive national insurance contribution changes—which this one is certainly not; it is regressive—or an increase in dividend taxation, as the Institute for Public Policy Research and others have advocated. There are far more progressive ways to fund social care and the NHS. This increase is not progressive, and I urge the Government to withdraw it immediately. Diolch yn fawr.

4.14 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), and the shadow Chancellor, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), for selecting this extraordinarily important debate. A long and bitter winter is at last coming to an end, but while my constituents look to Westminster for a helping hand to see them through the enormously difficult months ahead, this Government are instead planning to deal millions of hard-working people and small businesses a cataclysmic tax hike at the very worst time. Even before Putin commenced his barbaric onslaught on the independence and sovereignty of Ukraine and sent shockwaves across the global economy, thousands of my constituents were grappling with spiralling inflation, rising food costs and soaring energy prices.

Time and time again, I have warned this House about the devastation being inflicted upon constituencies like mine in Birkenhead, with parents going hungry so that their children can eat, old-age pensioners who have worked all their lives freezing in their homes because they cannot afford to put the meter on, and kids without even a mattress to sleep on. That is the grim reality confronting our country today. Now, Britain's billionaire Chancellor is threatening to shove millions of hard-working families off the precipice and into the deepest depths of destitution with this senseless hike in national insurance contributions.

While Ministers are asking my constituents, some of the poorest in the country, to dig deep to pay for the mess that the Conservatives have made in health and social care, the Chancellor and Prime Minister have been quick to assure their friends in the City—those with the broadest shoulders of all—that they will not be called

upon to play their part. There should be absolutely no doubt about whose side this Government are on. Let us be clear about exactly what this tax hike will mean for the people I represent. A single-parent family earning minimum wage in my constituency will be forced to hand hundreds of pounds more over to the taxman each year, while the landlord who charges them extortionate rents for damp and draughty houses will pay exactly zero pence more.

For 12 long years, Government Members have turned their eyes away from the immense human suffering that austerity has inflicted upon my constituents in Birkenhead and on communities across the UK, but they can plead ignorance no longer. This historic cost of living crisis will spare no corner of our country, and however they vote later today, they will do so in the full knowledge of what this catastrophic tax hike will mean for the people who elected them to this place. The country will not soon forget the fact that when they were given the opportunity to stand up for working people in the midst of the worst cost of living crisis in recent memory, Tory MPs shrugged their shoulders and slinked away.

4.17 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): Listening to Members on the Government Benches this afternoon makes me believe that they are living in an alternative universe, because during this pandemic, the number of billionaires has increased and the richest 1% have increased their wealth exponentially, while more are suffering in-work poverty and are increasingly reliant on food banks. We are the fifth richest country in the world, and that should not be happening.

A recent report from Oxfam found that an annual wealth tax on billionaires and multimillionaires in the UK could pay the salaries of £50,000 new nurses, permanently increase universal credit by £20 a week and build 35,000 new affordable homes. It also said that the revenue could cover the cost of the health and social care levy twice over every year, completely eliminating the need to raise national insurance and place the financial burden on those least likely to afford it. What have the Tories actually done? They have chosen to hit the lowest paid and the youngest the hardest. The very key workers who kept our country going throughout the pandemic are now struggling to put food on the table. Research by the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union showed that 40% of its members were eating less because of a lack of cash, and nearly 10% had run out of food altogether because of a lack of money.

The choices that this Government have made are driving working people into food poverty, so does the Minister agree that their record of giving bankers a billion-pound tax break while voting to raise taxes on working people and cut social security and pensions in real terms is an absolute disgrace? Inflation is predicted to rise above 8%, but benefits are increasing by only 3%. This is the worst time to increase national insurance contributions, as it will hit working people hardest and mean that they will have to decide whether to eat or heat.

My constituency has some of the highest child poverty rates in the country, rocketing to 29.3% compared with the national average of 19.1%. One quarter of children in my constituency live in absolute poverty, although

more than half of those families have at least one parent in work. Our NHS and social care systems are on their knees after a decade of Tory cuts. They should be funded by a wealth tax on the super-rich, not by a tax rise on the poor, who are already being hit hardest by the crushing cost of living crisis that is expected to worsen after April with a 54% increase in the cost of energy, food and fuel.

Instead of supporting and resourcing local government to provide gold standard in-house social care services with decent pay and conditions for workers, the Tories have systematically defunded councils for 12 years. They have cut £450 million in Liverpool alone, with a further £34 million of cuts in the pipeline. No matter how the Government try to dress it up, the perfect storm of low pay, insecure work and tax hikes on working people means that the finances of millions of families across the country are on the brink of catastrophe.

We cannot allow the Government to continue to turn a blind eye to the skyrocketing levels of poverty that they are presiding over. We must take urgent action to reverse the cuts to public services and local government, implement a £15 an hour minimum wage to boost the income of the lowest earners, reverse the cuts to social security and pension payments, and scrap the national insurance contributions hike. The worst of the cost of living crisis is yet to come. Enough is enough: it is time to make the wealthy pay their fair share and alleviate the burden on the working classes.

4.21 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I rise to speak in support of the motion calling for the Government to cancel their planned 1.25% rise in national insurance contributions, which will cost families an average of £500 a year from April 2022. Many of my constituents have been telling me that they are struggling with the increase in the cost of living. I spoke to a mother of a disabled child living in Dallow, who was scared about whether she could afford to pay her rising gas bill as she needed to keep the heating on for her disabled child's condition. Similarly, in Farley, an older couple with serious health conditions who live on a fixed income are struggling with increased food prices and energy bills.

Many of my constituents have also been in touch about petrol price increases and have pointed out that the Tory cost of living crisis is being further exploited by sharp and often inconsistent rises at different petrol stations. People are driving to different areas in desperation to find the cheapest one to save a few pounds so that they can get to work. Will the Minister set out what action the Government are taking to tackle the large increases in petrol prices and any apparent profiteering that is taking place?

The reality is that people are really worried about their future and in just a few weeks, there will still be a devastating set of tax hikes. According to the Resolution Foundation, the average combined impact of the freeze in income tax thresholds and the 1.25% increase in personal national insurance contributions is about £600 per household. Combined with the £444 increase in energy bills expected in the next financial year for a household that gets the Chancellor's loan and council tax reduction, that means that most households will still be more than £1,000 worse off in 2022-23.

It is clear that the Conservative Government are choosing to increase national insurance on working people and businesses at the worst possible time. The increase is deeply unfair because it will hit 27 million workers directly in their pay packets while leaving other forms of income, such as from buying and selling property, owning multiple buy-to-lets and dealing in stocks and shares, untouched. Many of my constituents do not have such wealth and assets, which is why it is unfair and why Labour has long called for the national insurance rise to be halted, so that it does not make the cost of living crisis worse.

In response to points made by Conservative Members—I am sad that the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) is no longer in his place—I say that the tax increase is regressive. Figures from the income tax calculator published in *The Guardian* a few weeks ago show that earners of £100,000 a year could end up paying proportionately less in national insurance than those on middle incomes if the increase goes through. They will pay just 7% of their overall salary, which is the same proportion as someone on £20,000 a year. The Treasury's claim that this is progressive is not borne out when those earning between £30,000 and £50,000 will be the hardest hit by far. Someone on £50,000 a year will pay national insurance contributions of about 10% of their gross salary after April, and those on £30,000 will pay about 9% of their gross salary. From April, it will be about 13.25% on most earnings up to £50,000, but just 3.25% on any income above that threshold. We in the Labour party know that people need help now, and that is why the Government should act now.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Minister, James Murray, and I do hope that hon. and right hon. Members will listen to the wind-ups. I realise that a lot of people have come in for the next business, but we have had a long debate and we want to hear from the shadow Minister and the Minister.

4.25 pm

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): Today, we have heard from hon. Members representing people across the country about why it is so important that the Government cancel their national insurance hike on working people and their jobs. My hon. Friends the Members for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), for Easington (Grahame Morris), for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter), for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) and for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) all spoke powerfully about how so many of their constituents are struggling with the costs of living and how those pressures have been rising rapidly in recent months. My hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) and for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) spoke about the fundamental unfairness of the Government's approach with their national insurance hike.

In September last year, the Government pushed their national insurance hike through Parliament in a day. From the very start, it was clear that this was a deeply unfair tax hike that would hit working people and their jobs. We urged the Government to think again and reverse course, but they refused to do so, and they have kept refusing to reverse course, despite people facing

[James Murray]

mounting difficulties in making ends meet. Inflation, already at its highest rate in decades, is forecast to hit 8% in April. Energy bills that have been rising rapidly are set to soar next month, and now the crisis in Ukraine will bring even greater pressure on the cost of energy, petrol and food. Yet in four weeks' time, the Government's tax rise will kick in, costing the average family £500 a year. It is the worst possible tax rise at the worst possible time.

Back in September when the Government pushed this tax rise through Parliament, we immediately knew how unfair it would be. The Government's own published assessment of this tax rise made that clear. Their tax information and impact note, which Ministers had to approve, set out what effect this tax rise would have. The note looked at this tax rise from a number of angles, including how it performed against the Government's so-called family test. As hon. Members may remember, the family test was introduced by David Cameron in 2014. When the then Prime Minister announced this new test, he said he wanted to

"strengthen and support family life in Britain".

His plan to do so was to make sure that

"every single domestic policy that government comes up with will be examined for its impact on the family."

That test was applied to the national insurance increase last September, and the outcome of that test was to warn of

"an impact on family formation, stability or breakdown as individuals, who are currently just about managing financially, will see their disposable income reduce."

That warning alone should have given Conservative MPs reason to stop in their tracks and think again. They should have stopped and listened to the Institute for Fiscal Studies warning of this tax rise involving

"a large, unjustified and problematic bias against employment and labour incomes".

They should have listened to the TUC general secretary, Frances O'Grady, warning of the hit faced by young and low-paid workers with this tax rise. They could have listened to any of the many voices against their plans, as the impact of this tax rise on people's ability to make ends meet was clear back in September.

The impact on jobs and businesses was clear then, too. Again, the Government's own assessment made that clear. It admitted the tax rise would impact on business decisions on wage bills and recruitment. The Federation of Small Businesses described the tax rise as

"devastating for small businesses and the local communities they serve."

The British Chambers of Commerce described it as a

"hammer blow to jobs growth".

Despite all those warnings, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor refused to think again. The Conservatives refused to listen to our calls for those with the broadest shoulders to contribute more. Their response to the low-growth, high-tax economic cycle they have created was to make working people foot the bill.

Even if some Conservative Members managed to hold their noses and vote with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor last September, it is astonishing that they still feel able to do so after all that has happened

since then. Energy bills have been rising fast and now are set to soar. We know that energy bills will rise by an average of more than £600 this April. Inflation is already—
[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I said this a few minutes ago but as I have a larger audience I think it is worth repeating. We have been having a debate, the shadow Minister and the Minister are responding to that debate, and hon. and right hon. Members want to hear what they have to say. I hope those present will do them the courtesy of being quiet, so we can listen to the shadow Minister first and then the Minister.

James Murray: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. As I said, if Conservative Members managed to hold their noses last September to vote with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, it is truly astonishing that they still feel able to do so now after all that has happened. Energy bills have been rising fast and are set to rise by more than £600 in April. Inflation is at its highest rate in decades and is set to rocket to 8% next month.

What is more, the Government's arguments that they need this money for social care have been left in tatters. Not only have they failed to produce a plan to fix social care, but we know that Ministers looked the other way as billions of pounds of public money were handed out to fraudsters and written off. They ignored the warnings on fraud, they were careless with waste and they are now expecting working people to foot the bill for their mistakes.

If that was not bad enough, it is now clear that private sector workers will be asked to pay twice. As our new analysis shows, private sector workers will face a double whammy as almost all the rise in their employers' contributions is set to be passed on to workers through lower wages.

Ministers, and indeed some of their Back Benchers, often try to pretend that the cost of living crisis is entirely the result of global factors, but that argument simply does not hold true. Most damagingly, it ignores the fact that the Government could, and should, be doing far more to help people to make ends meet. The truth is that decisions by this Government over many years have left us uniquely exposed to rising gas prices. From cutting gas storage, to leaving our homes poorly insulated and failing to invest in renewables and nuclear, this Government's approach means that rising energy costs hit people in the UK much harder than they should.

The truth is that the Government have failed to step up and offer people the help they need with energy bills now. Labour's plan is to give everyone £200 and those in greatest need £600 to help to meet energy costs. That would be funded with a one-off windfall tax on North sea oil and gas producers' profits. The alternative from the Chancellor is to land everyone with a buy now, pay later loan and to announce a council tax rebate that some of those in the greatest need will never even see.

The truth is that, when it comes to the tax rise we are debating today—an unfair tax rise on working people, a tax rise of £500 for the average family, a tax rise on businesses and jobs—the responsibility begins and ends here. Conservative MPs voted six months ago for that tax rise. Last week, the Minister admitted to me that the

Government recognise the impact the tax rise will have on working people. Today, they have a chance to change course.

Today, we are asking all Members to join us in asking the Government to think again. When the Government first introduced this tax rise on working people and their jobs, it was blindingly unfair. Far from asking those with the broadest shoulders to contribute more, the Tories showed their true colours and went straight for a tax rise on 27 million working people. Since then, the case against the tax rise has got stronger and stronger. With energy bills rising and about to soar and with inflation set to hit 8%, the struggle for millions of people to make ends meet is getting harder by the day. Now is the time to change course and help people to face the tough months ahead. Now is the time to send a message to the Chancellor ahead of his Budget on 23 March. Now is finally the time to do the right thing and cancel this unfair tax rise.

4.35 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Frazer):

It is a privilege to close the debate on behalf of the Government and I echo the words of my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury about the situation in Ukraine. Our thoughts are, of course, with the men, women and children struggling to comprehend and respond to the day-to-day realities of the Russian invasion.

I turn to the specifics of the motion and the health and social care levy. We must—and we will—press ahead. In fact, as the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray) recognised, legislation has already been debated and enacted. Introducing the levy was a tough but responsible choice, which is what good government is all about.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) said that these are good proposals and that we need to spend the money on health and social care. The levy is a means to tackle a number of crucial ends: tackling the backlog in our national health service and aiding its recovery from the challenges of covid, while finally enacting long-term reform of social care, an issue that too many Governments have ducked for too long. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) said, other Governments have simply put it on the “too difficult to do” pile. As he recognised, it needs serious and sustained funding. A record £13 billion a year on average will now be invested in the NHS and social care by way of a new UK-wide 1.25% ringfenced levy based on national insurance contributions and an equivalent increase in dividend tax rates.

Many Opposition Members, including the hon. Members for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders)—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

Order. It is getting very noisy again. Please respect the Minister, who is winding up the debate. Let us listen to what she has to say.

Lucy Frazer: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was just highlighting the number of Opposition Members, including the hon. Members for Easington (Grahame Morris) and for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson),

who challenged the Government, as others have, on their approach to the cost of living. But the plain truth is that we recognise the pressure that people face. We have done what we can to ease that pressure and will continue to explore other measures.

Frankly, our actions speak for themselves. During the pandemic, we provided more than £400 billion of direct support to the economy, protecting millions of jobs and livelihoods. The hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) said that we should invest more, but we are spending more than £600 billion on gross public sector investment over the course of the Parliament.

The hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) said that we should have acted on the cost of living in September. But we did. The Government are providing support worth more than £20 billion across this financial year and next that will help families with the cost of living. We provided that funding not just in September; we have consistently tried to support those on the lowest incomes. As the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) mentioned, it is important that we support those who need it most and, since 2010, Conservative Governments have kept lower-paid people out of tax. The income tax personal allowance threshold has increased by over 90%, meaning that a typical basic rate taxpayer now pays £1,200 less a year than they would have done without our changes.

A number of Members have discussed whether the system we are introducing is progressive. The hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) and the hon. Member for Cynon Valley challenged that, but it obviously is when 15% of taxpayers are paying 50% of the tax and the highest 2% of taxpayers are paying 20% of the tax. As well as that, the levy will ensure that those on the lowest income get the most support. In our reformed system, total social care spend on the least wealthy 20% of older adults will be £4.24 billion in 2021-22 in a steady state compared with £0.51 billion on the wealthiest 20% of older adults. That shows that the lowest wealth quintile continues to receive the most state support.

The hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) and the hon. Member for Luton South said that we should cancel this tax because it was unfair, and they both quoted the IFS. When we introduced this levy, Paul Johnson, the director of the IFS, said that this was an “overall much needed” reform to social care and that

“unavoidable pressures on the NHS are being funded through a broad based and broadly progressive tax increase”.

I turn to the very important topic of fiscal responsibility. As my hon. Friends the Members for South Cambridgeshire and for Broadland commented, if we do not bring in this tax rise, the alternative is more borrowing. We cannot and should not abdicate our fiscal responsibilities. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) said, we spent £400 billion during the course of covid. We are in debt and we need to be honest about the situation. Our level of debt means that we are vulnerable to shocks, including changes in interest rates and inflation. The public finances are stronger as a result of our early, bold action to support the economy during the pandemic and because we did not shy away from tough choices.

Our new fiscal rules demonstrate fiscal responsibility and will keep the public finances on track in the years to come. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Members for

[Lucy Frazer]

Gordon (Richard Thomson) and for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) talked about young people, but if we do not bring in these taxes—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I do not think the Minister will speak for that much longer, so please will hon. Members keep the noise down and hear what she has to say?

Lucy Frazer: If we do not bring in this taxation, we will have future generations left paying bills in our stead.

In conclusion, this has been an important and constructive debate concerning issues that matter deeply and on which we as a Government will not compromise. Being in Government is about making the best possible decisions on behalf of the British people. The health and social care levy is emblematic of that responsibility. It is the right policy at the right time for the right reasons.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls on the Government to cancel its planned 1.25 percentage point rise in National Insurance Contributions that will cost families an average of £500 per year from April 2022.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I will now suspend the sitting. The Division bells will ring two minutes before we resume informally to hear President Zelensky's address.

4.44 pm

Sitting suspended.

[*The text of the address by the President of Ukraine is published at the end of today's debates.*]

5.12 pm

On resuming—

Mr Speaker: I will take points of order from the leaders of the main parties before we return to the Opposition day debate.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Never before in all our centuries of parliamentary democracy has the House listened to such an address. In a great European capital, now within range of Russian guns, President Volodymyr Zelensky is standing firm for democracy and for freedom. In his righteous defiance, I believe he has moved the hearts of everybody in this House.

At this moment, ordinary Ukrainians are defending their homes and their families against a brutal assault. They are, by their actions, inspiring millions with their courage and their devotion. Today, one of the proudest boasts in the free world is, "Ya Ukrainets"—I am a Ukrainian.

This is a moment for us to put our political differences aside. I know I speak for the whole House when I say that Britain and our allies are determined to press on—to press on with supplying our Ukrainian friends with the weapons they need to defend their homeland, as they deserve, and to press on with tightening the economic vice around Vladimir Putin. We will stop importing Russian oil, and my right hon. Friend the

Business Secretary will update the House on that tomorrow. We will employ every method that we can—diplomatic, humanitarian and economic—until Vladimir Putin has failed in this disastrous venture and Ukraine is free once more.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

5.14 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Every one of us has been moved by the bravery, the resolve and the leadership of President Zelensky. Invading troops marched through his streets, shells rained down on his people and assassins seek his life. No one would have blamed him for fleeing, but instead he has stayed in Kyiv to lead the Ukrainian people and to fight. He has reminded us that our freedom and our democracy are invaluable. He has prompted the world into action where, too often, we have let Putin have his way. He has inspired the Ukrainian people to resist and he has frustrated the Russian war machine. He has shown his strength, and we must show him and the Ukrainian people our commitment and our support.

Labour stands for the unity at home and abroad that will isolate the Putin regime. Labour stands for the toughest sanctions that will cripple the Russian state. Labour stands for providing Ukraine with the arms it needs to fight off its invaders. Labour stands with President Zelensky, with Ukraine, with democracy. Slava Ukraini.

5.16 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. President Zelensky, we salute you. We stand with the people of Ukraine on the basis of the act of aggression—of the act of war—of Putin. We must do all that we can to send support to Ukraine and to send the weapons that they need to defend themselves, and to make sure that we sanction the regime in Moscow, that we deliver the clearest message to President Putin that this will end in failure for him, and that he will face justice at the International Criminal Court. We must stand in this House, throughout these islands, throughout the western world, in defence of democracy, in defence of sovereignty. Peace, justice and the sovereignty of Ukraine must prevail. Let us make sure that we stand with our friends and that we stand with those who have been bombed. We must make sure that those who need our support, who need our sanctuary, will find a welcoming hand in these islands. Mr President, we thank you. We salute you. Slava Ukraini.

5.17 pm

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Hearing the words of President Zelensky should embolden us all. They serve as a reminder of all that we stand for and of all that so many Ukrainians are so bravely fighting for—a bravery exemplified by President Zelensky himself. We should never take for granted our values of democracy, of freedom and of our security. Though we in this House may disagree on many things, we stand together for those values, and we stand together with the Ukrainian people.

It is right that we strengthen our support for Ukraine with military aid and with the toughest of sanctions. It is in that support that we should also recognise the people of Ukraine and, indeed, President Zelensky. I am sure the whole House would agree that President Zelensky should be granted one of our nation's highest honours—an honorary knighthood. I look forward to the day when we welcome back to this House President Zelensky in person.

5.18 pm

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We commend President Zelensky and the people of Ukraine and we stand with them in this their time of strife, but our response will not be judged by the volume or strength of our applause for President Zelensky. It will be judged by the volume and strength of our response to his request for help—for practical military support and for humanitarian assistance for the people of Ukraine. We pray for their success. We dare not let them down.

Mr Speaker: I also thank the staff and the contractors for making this happen. When you leave the Chamber, please hand in your headsets on the way out to whoever you got them from.

Rape and Sexual Violence

5.21 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House commemorates International Women's Day; regrets that under this Government conviction rates for rape have reached a historic low and that the typical delay between reporting an offence of rape and the completion of the resulting criminal case is over 1,000 days; calls on the Government to introduce minimum sentences for stalking and rape, to raise minimum sentencing for spiking and to implement Labour's survivors' package for victims of rape and serious sexual violence to restore trust in the criminal justice system; and further calls on the Government to begin an immediate assessment of the impact of setting up specialist rape offence courts on the significant Crown Court backlog of rape cases, as recommended by HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate.

Today is International Women's Day, a day when we celebrate the achievements and progress of women. On the day President Zelensky addressed Parliament, I start by paying tribute to the brave women and girls of Ukraine—those who have left their loved ones behind as they flee war, those who have had to endure childbirth in bunkers and those who remain in the country facing Russia's aggression. I know hon. Members on both sides of this House want to offer them our full solidarity.

International Women's Day is also a time to reflect on some of the challenges we still face at home, among the gravest of which is rape and sexual violence. Tackling and preventing violence against women must be a national priority. Women and girls must feel safe to walk home at night, feel able to have a drink in a pub or nightclub and live free from the fear of an abusive partner. When women report a rape, they must feel that the criminal justice system is working for them, not against them. Yet, due to the problems of our justice system in ensuring that victims of rape and sexual violence receive justice, the sad truth is that we have seen the effective decriminalisation of rape.

The latest Office for National Statistics crime figures for 2021 show that sexual offences recorded by the police are at record highs. Rape accounted for 37% of those offences, and the latest Home Office data shows that just 2.9% of reported sexual offences and 1.3% of recorded rapes result in a charge or summons. Let that sink in: only in just over one in 100 reported rapes is someone charged. Those are record lows. Not only that, but in the tiny minority of cases that are prosecuted, victims now face more than 1,000 days' delay from the report of the offence to completion at court—an unacceptably long wait for a survivor to access justice.

Meanwhile, Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate found that in cases involving rape and serious sexual offences, nearly half of CPS letters lacked basic empathy, and only 19% of letters were of the right quality. The Victims' Commissioner found that only one in seven victims believed that they would receive justice by reporting the crime to the police. That is a sign that victims are losing faith in the system. Inadequate support, along with delays, means that 41% of rape cases now end with the victim's withdrawing their support. No wonder many survivors feel the system is working against them, not for them. That is completely the wrong way around.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and hope the Minister is able to respond to this point as well. I have previously mentioned that women who are subjected to rape are not entitled to criminal injuries compensation if they have had a prior conviction, whatever that conviction might be. That means that if they are then a victim of rape they are entitled to no compensation. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is completely unfair, and that just because someone may have committed a crime in the past, that does not mean that when they are raped they should not have some compensation for the suffering they faced?

Ellie Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point so passionately. She is absolutely right, and of course this needs to be looked at and changed.

The impact of these failings in the criminal justice system is all too real for many of those with lived experience of it. One survivor at a recent roundtable I held along with my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) told us that while they had come to terms with what had happened to them, they could not come to terms with how they had been treated by the criminal justice system. Survivors continually tell us that they often feel as though they are the ones being investigated or standing trial, and that lengthy court delays compound and extend their trauma. One survivor said:

“I still have flashbacks to the whole process and ask myself what I could have done differently. The defendant had help on what to expect in court, but all I had was someone saying ‘if you tell the truth then that’s enough’—well I did tell the truth but it wasn’t enough.”

Another said:

“It was my belief that all of this extra pain and suffering being endured by myself in order to go through the investigation with only a slight chance of it going to court wasn’t worth it in my opinion. Especially since I would have had to face my perpetrator in court and I was told it most likely wouldn’t end up with a prosecution anyway.”

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for the excellent comments she is making in emphasising the importance of hearing the voices of survivors of sexual assault. Will she join me in congratulating my constituent Anna Robinson, who has written a play about her experience of sexual assault and going through the criminal justice system with the many failings and delays in it? The play, which is touching and moving, and also funny, is playing at the Alphabetti theatre in Newcastle right now and is a marvellous example of the victim finding a voice.

Ellie Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and the tribute that she pays to her constituent Anna Robinson. It sounds like a fantastic play, and I am sure she has shown great bravery and courage in using her experience to shine a light on the difficulties that women face.

The cases that I referred to are not unique. The recent criminal justice joint inspectorate report said that the criminal justice system is failing victims of rape and that widespread reform is needed. Despite all this, action from the Government has been lukewarm and lacks urgency. We welcomed the end-to-end rape review, but it took over two years to publish it, and we are now one year on from that with little noticeable change. The review’s commitment to developing a better understanding

of the impacts of trauma on rape victims and survivors across the criminal justice system, and the important commitment to taking a more suspect-focused approach to rape investigations, was encouraging and welcome. Yet even so, the review’s proposals were just piecemeal ideas without the funding and real accountability to make the change needed, and there was a concerning lack of urgency in the timescales put forward. The scorecards, which are a useful tool for transparency, completely lacked an equalities analysis, meaning that there is a blind spot in understanding justice outcomes for rape victims and survivors who are black and minoritised, deaf and disabled, or LGBT+. As long as this information remains missing it will show a fundamental lack of commitment to making our justice system work for everyone.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I want to speak on the point of making the justice system work for everyone. My constituent Michelle recently wrote to me because she has a stalker who is the father of her child. He has abused her, threatened her, and turned up on her doorstep and her mother’s doorstep. She spoke to the police, who said that she should apply for a non-molestation order, but she does not qualify for legal aid because she works full time and, as a single parent, she cannot pay solicitors’ fees. Will my hon. Friend comment on the fact that there are women like Michelle falling through the cracks in the justice system, and something needs to be done to help them?

Ellie Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point and shining a light on the dreadful situation her constituent is facing. Stalking is a really serious crime, and later in my speech, I will say a little bit about what Labour would do to be tougher on stalkers.

One of the commitments made by the Government in the rape review was to return to 2016 charging levels for rape cases, but at the current rate of progress it will take 29 years to reach that target, and even then it is not a particularly ambitious target. In the absence of effective leadership, the Labour party has put forward a plan to reverse the trend of falling prosecutions, to ensure victims can once again have faith in the system that is supposed to protect them. Our survivors support plan would fast-track rape and serious sexual assault cases through the police, Crown Prosecution Service and courts; establish a pre and post-trial survivors support package, including a full legal advocacy scheme for victims and better training for professionals about myths and stereotypes; and appoint a Minister for survivors of rape and sexual violence to investigate and tackle the root causes of delays in the system and act as a champion for victims. We would also end lenient sentences for rape and stalking by introducing new statutory minimum sentences, as well as toughening up sentences for spiking.

It is unacceptable that rape victims are waiting years post-charge for a court date, especially given the comparatively small number of cases that are going through the system. Rape survivors are often the most vulnerable and traumatised, but waiting for trial means they cannot move on with their lives and cannot access counselling for fear that their counselling notes will be disclosed at trial.

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a good speech. There is an important point about judicial listing that we as a House have never really addressed, which is dealt with in the inspectorates’ report.

Out of something like 52 cases they looked at, 34 were relisted at least once during the process, so the victim, having waited one or two years, then waited again while the case was kicked out of the list and put in at a later date. We never talk about that in Parliament because it is seen as a judicial function, but does the hon. Lady think it is time we did?

Ellie Reeves: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to mention the joint inspectorates' report and what it said about this issue. The inspectorates looked at 54 rape cases, 32 of which were adjourned more than once; one was adjourned 21 times, often at 24 hours' notice. In their report, the inspectorates recommended that the Ministry of Justice immediately group adult rape cases into specialist rape offence courts, which called on the Government to look at implementing a year ago. It is not difficult to imagine how those courts could be set up using the existing court capacity, with a few courtrooms in every Crown court centre allocated to dealing with rape cases and existing ticketed judges hearing the claims. Best practice around separate entrances and exits for accuser and accused could be enforced, and safe space rooms could be available. Today, we ask the Government to begin an immediate review into setting up specialist rape offence courts to help clear the significant Crown court backlog, so that rape victims are not waiting nearly three years for their cases to get to court. I hope the Minister will back this call.

Allowing victims to give their evidence and be cross-examined pre-recorded, known as section 28, also has an important role to play in speeding up cases. It has applied to child and vulnerable witnesses for some time, and the equipment to hear evidence in this way is available in every Crown court in the country. Labour has long called for section 28 to be rolled out to victims of rape and serious sexual violence. It would mean victims could give their evidence as soon as possible, improving the accuracy of their testimony, relieving some of the stress and anxiety while waiting for trial and allowing them to pursue pre-trial counselling, yet in the Government's end-to-end rape review, all they offered was an extension of the existing section 28 pilot from three Crown courts to a further four. The Government finally said in December last year that they were committed to rolling out section 28 for intimidated witnesses, yet we are still waiting for that to happen. Even in the pilot areas, the inspectorate's report found that section 28 is not being used consistently by the police or the Crown Prosecution Service.

We are three years on from the Government announcing their end-to-end rape review, yet section 28 is being used for rape victims in only a handful of Crown courts, and even then the necessary training and awareness are not fully in place. Warm words and promises are all very well, but without the political will to make things happen, the pace of change will be far too slow for thousands of victims.

One of the things that survivors tell us time and time again is that they feel the criminal justice system is working against them. With no right to their own legal support, they can find themselves trying to navigate a complex and opaque system on their own. One victim said of their journey through the criminal justice system:

"I felt unsupported by the prosecution lawyer. I did not know his name or how he was going to advocate for me. I had only met him 10 minutes before going into court. The whole experience is traumatising. I completely understand why people do not report rape to the police."

Other victims have told me that the demands to disclose all the data on their mobile phones going back years made them feel like they were the ones on trial, and that they were unsure of their rights when it came to the digital strip search. That is why under Labour, rape victims would have a legal advocate from the moment they reported their case to the police station, right through to trial. That advocate would be there for them every step of the way, driving up standards in the criminal justice system and reducing attrition rates, but the idea is nothing new. A pilot of that scheme was trialled in Northumbria in 2020, and it found that legal advocates substantially improved best practice in the police and CPS and led to an overall improved victim experience. It would cost just £3.9 million annually to replicate this scheme across England and Wales. If the Government were truly serious about this issue, they would roll it out in a heartbeat.

As well as fixing these problems with the criminal justice system, we need to see sentences that deter potential offenders and send a strong signal that violence against women and girls will never be tolerated, but the public are losing confidence in the Government on this, with polling showing that seven in 10 women consider action to stop sexual harassment, rape and domestic abuse to be inadequate. That is why we are announcing that a Labour Government would toughen sentences for spiking and introduce minimum sentences for rape and stalking.

There is currently no statutory minimum sentence for rape, only a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. While the starting tariff in the sentencing guidelines is five years, that can be reduced. In 2021 alone, seven rape convictions were referred to the Attorney General's Office through the unduly lenient sentences scheme. They had initial sentences ranging from two to five years. Despite that, none of the cases was referred to the Court of Appeal. Truly appalling crimes are receiving lenient sentences, yet the Government are not doing anything to tackle it. Labour would introduce a new statutory minimum sentence of seven years, which better reflects the seriousness of the crime and the lives it destroys.

Sentences for stalking and harassment do not reflect the fear and distress they create for the victims of these crimes, who are very often women and girls. Despite a record number of convictions for stalking in 2019, more than half of those convicted got community or suspended sentences. Labour would create a new minimum custodial sentence of five months for stalking involving fear of violence or serious alarm or distress. A court would have to impose at least the statutory minimum, unless there were exceptional circumstances.

Despite a surge in reports of spiking to the police in recent years, there have been no more than 66 prosecutions in any year since 2010, and only 512 in total between 2010 and 2020. Conviction rates have also plummeted, with just 0.56 convictions per prosecution over that time period. Under pressure from Labour, the Government have agreed to a review into spiking, which we welcome, to find out how widespread it is and who is being targeted, but the review does not explicitly cover sentencing, and it must. We need tougher spiking laws to deter people from committing this awful crime, and a Labour Government would seek to introduce tougher sentences by referring the issue to the Sentencing Council for new guidance. I hope the Government will agree to do that.

[Ellie Reeves]

Under the Conservatives, rape prosecutions are at a record low, so perpetrators are left on the streets and can reoffend, which leaves women and girls less safe. The Conservatives call themselves the party of law and order, but how can they say that when they have effectively allowed rape to be decriminalised on their watch? Until we have a Government who are ready and willing to commit to the actions needed to drive up rape prosecutions, victims will continue to be failed by the system. The Opposition have a plan to put things right. Is it not about time that the Government backed it?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): As colleagues will appreciate, time is pretty short, so it is likely that I will introduce a time limit of five minutes once the Minister has sat down.

5.40 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Victoria Atkins): I have had the privilege of debating International Women's Day for several years, but never has one been set in such an atmosphere or against such an international backdrop as the horrific invasion of Ukraine. We are incredibly honoured to have heard moments ago from President Zelensky, who is facing enormous threats to his personal safety and that of his country and fellow citizens. I will address the debate in the same spirit of international unity on this great day when we celebrate and mark our hopes and aspirations for women around the world.

The last 13 days have shown how precious democracy is across the world. We in the United Kingdom have a long and proud history of democracy, but it is something that we must protect, cherish and nurture. We in this Chamber are the personification of the importance of democracy in our country. It is through contributions made here, and through the work of Back-Bench MPs and Ministers, that we deliver change through democratic processes in our great country.

We are already hearing of terrifying incidents of violence against women and girls in Ukraine. Of course, we have seen the absolutely heart-rending experiences of women and girls fleeing their home and their country to seek safety and sanctuary elsewhere in Europe. We stand with them and with all women and girls who are living through conflict in this terrible time. I take in genuine spirit the tone in which the debate has been raised and I invite, as we have as a Government, scrutiny of the measures that we are taking to address violence against women and girls.

We have taken a hard and honest look at how the entire criminal justice system deals with rape and serious sexual violence. We have acknowledged that in too many instances, it has simply not been good enough. Since the publication of the rape review last year, however, we have learned lessons and we have brought and are bringing measures into place to build change.

When these devastating crimes happen, we want victims to come forward and feel confident to report them and to seek justice. That involves many stages of the criminal justice process from the moment a report is made to the police to the conclusion of the case. On the global stage and on British streets, we are working tirelessly every day to ensure that women and girls feel safe and that

they know that they can trust the criminal justice system to punish perpetrators. We are breaking biases, supporting victims and making the changes that the public expect.

Emma Hardy: As I raised with my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), when rape convictions are completed and somebody is found guilty, the victim is sometimes unable to get criminal injuries compensation because she may have prior convictions that are unrelated to sexual assault, as happened to my constituent. I have raised that in Parliament before and I was promised a meeting with a Minister, which has not yet been forthcoming. In the spirit of co-operation, I hope that on the issue of sexual violence, the Minister will look again at eligibility for criminal injuries compensation.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady has raised an important point and I undertake myself to meet her to discuss this—very much so.

This Government have taken decisive and measurable action in the last 12 months to make our system stronger. I stress the word “measurable” because this is how we are going to drive change across agencies over the coming months and years to address the issues highlighted in today's debate. We are focusing on preventing these horrendous crimes from taking place in the first place. We published the tackling violence against women and girls strategy last year very much in response to the 180,000 accounts that we received from women and girls, and men, who wanted to share their thoughts and experiences of violence against women and girls.

We have already put a range of practical steps in place, including, only last week, the public communications campaign “Enough”, which I encourage all Members across the House to share on their social media channels and networks to get the message out about the unacceptable attitudes that we do not want to see in our country in the 2020s.

We have also funded local projects and initiatives across England and Wales to the tune of more than £27 million to improve the safety of women in public spaces through the safer streets fund. I know this is a matter of interest to various colleagues. We, of course, have the roll-out of statutory relationships, sex and health education in schools, because we understand that we need to ensure that children and young people are taught at the earliest age possible and in an age-appropriate way what healthy and respectful love looks like.

In the last year, we have also published the end-to-end rape review report and action plan and we have looked at every stage of the criminal justice system. The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), understandably, says it took a long time. It did, because this is such a complex area, and everybody in the House will appreciate that we do not want to suffer unintended consequences, no matter how well meaning measures may be in the first place. With that approach, we outlined in the action plan a robust and ambitious programme of work.

In December, precisely because we are determined to have an attitude of non-defensive transparency about what is happening at various stages across the criminal justice system, we published our first six-monthly progress report and quarterly scorecard for adult rape cases. I am never very sure about that precise word, but it is the

word we have come up with for the time being. It is about increasing public transparency of performance across the criminal justice system at every stage by grabbing data from the system from the moment a crime is recorded by the police to the completion of a case in court. The metrics have been selected to cover priority areas such as victim engagement, timeliness and the volume of cases reaching court.

The hon. Lady raised the point about equalities. Believe you me, this is something we are very conscious of. She will, I hope, understand—I do not say this by way of complaint; it is just a fact—that, because different parts of the CJS collect their data in different ways and measure different things, we have had to group together. She will have seen from the scorecards how carefully we have had to use the measures in various parts, because there is not a single line of measurement that runs through every stage of the CJS. We will get there, but at the moment it is taking a bit of time to collect that data. On the point about equalities, it is one of those measurements that we do not have yet. That is not for want of attention or effort, but it is taking a bit of time to try to address some of the very real equalities measurements. She will know, I hope, that, as part of the scorecard process, I personally not just chair meetings with leaders across the CJS, but listen to survivors groups, because they are the people who can very much guide us on some of this work.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Could the Minister explain whether there are any plans with any of the scorecards or process of monitoring to look at the data around constant and repeat offenders? One of the main problems in the system is that nobody is monitoring repeat offenders or doing any real offender management. What we see again and again is the same people committing the same crimes. Will anything be found in the data to deal with that particular issue?

Victoria Atkins: May I correct the hon. Lady on that point about repeat offenders? People are managing it and monitoring it, albeit not through the scorecard. She will know of the offender management systems in place and the ViSOR—violent and sex offender register—system. She will also know, because we discussed it at great length during the passage of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, of our programme to revolutionise the way the current system, MAPPA—the multi-agency public protection arrangements—works into MAPPS—the multi-agency public protection system—which will be able to track the most dangerous offenders in the ways both she and I want. We are offering these metrics precisely so that there can be scrutiny of the stages at which things are going right, or indeed wrong. Having produced national scorecards, we will soon produce local scorecards so we can look locally to see where good practice is happening and where other areas need to follow suit.

On the criminal justice system, we have recruited, as I hope the House knows, more than 11,000 police officers as part of our commitment to recruit 20,000 officers, and more than 100 prosecutors in the Crown Prosecution Service have already undertaken induction training on rape and serious sexual offences. On the point raised about mobile phones and the data strip search, again, having listened to victims, charities that support survivors and the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and the Victims' Commissioner, we have in the Police, Crime, Sentencing

and Courts Bill set out the legal framework for digital data downloads. We understand how that can be so terribly difficult for victims and their willingness, frankly, to go along with a case.

The issue of specialism has been raised. That is why we are supporting Operation Soteria, a joint police and CPS programme of work whereby they turn the investigation on its head, from looking at the victim to looking at the suspect. That is clearly the way forward and we have committed to expanding the initial work from five areas to, in the next tranche, 14. We will be rolling this out nationally, but we have to do it through the staged approach because one can imagine, I hope, the differences between a huge metropolitan force and a much smaller, more rural force in terms of economies of scale and ways of working. We are doing it in an iterative, careful way so that when we make change we make effective change that has meaningful and positive consequences for victims.

We are focusing even more on victim support, too. We are putting victims at the heart of the system so that they get the support they need to continue with such cases. We are providing an unprecedented £150 million to victims support services this year, an increase of over £100 million on the budget in 2010-11, and we have committed to increasing funding for all victims support services to £185 million by 2024-25, including increasing the number of independent sexual and domestic violence advisers, because we know that victims who have access to IDVAs and ISVAs are nearly 50% more likely to stay engaged with the criminal justice process.

We are also commissioning a new national helpline and online services for victims of rape and sexual violence, which will be available 24/7. This is a real step forward. We want victims to be able to get help when they need it. We have seen the huge successes of the national domestic abuse helpline and I want to replicate that for victims of sexual violence.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that many police forces no longer have RASSO—rape and serious sexual offences—units? Does she think they should have them?

Victoria Atkins: We have different agencies involved in the criminal justice system. Sometimes, there is an understandable wish in the Chamber for us to be able to control everything from the Dispatch Box, but we have a strong tradition of chief constables directing their personnel, training and so on. I have to say that the reaction of the police to Operation Soteria has been truly committed. They want to make the sort of changes we are already beginning to see with Op Soteria. I genuinely believe that, through Soteria, we will begin to see real change in policing. With the roll-out of that in the pilot areas, national learning is already being shared and that will roll through forces—even those not in the next tranche of 14.

I am conscious about giving Back Benchers time, so I will pick up just a couple more points. I hope that the House supports our decision to include violence against women and girls in the strategic policing requirement, which means that it must be prioritised as other serious crimes such as homicide, serious and organised crime and terrorism are prioritised. Of course, through the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and previous measures, this

[Victoria Atkins]

place has strengthened the law on things such as the so-called rough sex defence and the new offence of non-fatal strangulation. Indeed, the police Bill, which is in the other place, will increase the time that sexual offenders serving sentences for offences of particular concern must spend in prison from half their custodial term to two thirds.

We have heard about the roll-out of section 28, which, in fairness, I think the Opposition welcome. That is one of the levers by which we will really make progress on the timing of cases. If we can persuade the CPS and judges to permit victims to give their pre-recorded evidence at a very early stage in a case after investigation, that will help with timeliness. There is hope and expectation that that will increase guilty pleas, but also it will help victims to give their best evidence in a timely fashion, and juries will, in due course, be able to consider it. We will roll that out as soon as is practicable.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) highlighted the issue of cases being knocked off the list, floaters and so on. Again, we expect that section 28 will be able to deal with some of listing issues that she rightly raised..

Laura Farris: I of course endorse and support everything the Minister said on section 28. Everyone who has given evidence to the Home Affairs Committee's review on rape has spoken about how important that is. There have been one or two dissenting voices, but the power of section 28 procedures has basically been advocated across the board. The one thing that was said to the Justice Committee this afternoon that I must make the Minister aware of is that at the moment it is very patchy whether police forces across the country are even aware of section 28, or whether they are making victims aware of it. With the national roll-out, will she pledge to ensure that the police are applying it?

Victoria Atkins: Of course, that communication programme is part of our work in rolling it out. That is why we are working as fast as we can, but we do need to take the police and others with us.

In terms of minimum and maximum sentences, the average sentence for an offence of rape in 2020 was more than 10 years. We very much respect the right of courts to retain all available sentencing options in these cases, but we understand from the figures that we see that the courts are mindful of the enormous impact that these terrible offences can have on victims and the wider community.

I gently remind the Opposition that they called for a single Minister. Well, we have two for the price of one here on the Government Benches. We all understand that the criminal justice system has many facets. We have two Ministers solely focused on violence against women and girls. Finally, I thank every single woman—and every person—working across the criminal justice system to help support victims of rape and sexual violence. That includes those offering a hand to hold in a sexual assault referral centre, independent sexual violence advisers as well as our team of officers and Crown court and other litigators. Every single one of them is helping us to deliver justice and I thank them sincerely for it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We will start with a six-minute time limit, although that may well have to go down. I call Jess Phillips.

6 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I was not expecting to be called so quickly, so this is a delight, and Happy International Women's Day to you. I want to talk over a few things. Obviously, along with the shadow Justice Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), I spend a huge amount of time with victims and setting out what we think the Labour party policy needs to be, and I endorse absolutely everything that she said.

There are a number of things that I feel the Government are not currently addressing and on which there does not seem to be any direction of travel. The first thing—it would be remiss of me not to mention that this has come from almost every victim of sexual violence that I have ever met, and certainly in the past few weeks—is the commissioning strategy around health provision for victims of violence and abuse. In my view, and I tried to get everybody to vote for this during the passage of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, there should be a statutory duty on every public commissioning body that runs people-based services to have to commission specialist support for victims of violence and abuse. It is inexcusable that in the vast majority of mental health services across our country, there is absolutely nothing in the way of specialist support. I have never met somebody, male or female, suffering from substance misuses, who was heroin-dependent or who had their lives blighted by substance misuse, who had not suffered some form of sexual violence as a child or adult. The reality is that we should put in those specialist services and insist that every public health commissioner and every mental health commissioner in the country provides this as part of their sexual health and substance misuse strategies.

The Minister has talked about chief constables and the fact that they get to decide, and that local areas will pick. There is not a local area in the country where people are not being raped. There is not one; it is not one of those crimes. There are crimes that happen in my constituency every single day that likely are not happening so much in the Minister's constituency. We have very different seats, but this is not a crime that discriminates in any area. All our constituencies are full of people who are being raped and abused.

The situation at the moment is that, unlike what we have done in making refuge a statutory duty, we do not say that local decision makers and local commissioners have to provide specialist EMDR—eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing—trauma-based support. We sit back in this building and delegate responsibility to local decision makers. Personally, I think that if there is a chief constable in the country who thinks that they should not have specialist support and specialist officers for sexual violence, they should not be a chief constable in our country—the end. I am absolutely certain that the Minister agrees with me.

I wish to raise another very important point regarding healthcare. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Erewash

(Maggie Throup), answered a parliamentary question this week about ending telemedical abortions. She said that the Government had taken advice with regard to vulnerable women and how they use the service and that has resulted in the decision to end telemedical abortions. I would like Ministers to tell me which experts they spoke to, because there is not a women's organisation in the land that fights for women who have been victims of sexual violence or domestic abuse that would agree with the Government's current stance on telemedical abortions.

It does not begin and end with the criminal justice system—thank goodness, because there would be literally no hope for rape victims if that were the case. There is not a rape victim in the country who would say that they have had a good time in the criminal justice system. I have heard rape victims describe themselves as the lucky ones because they were raped by a stranger—and their phone was still taken off them. What on earth for? My phone is not taken off me when my car gets broken into. Why are we taking phones off them?

The Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), told me last week that there is never a time when she would not want to brief this House on Operation Soteria. I ask Ministers: when the people running Operation Soteria arranged with me to brief Members in this House about the findings of the Metropolitan police that in some cases three quarters of police officers think women routinely lie about their sexual violence experiences, why were we not allowed to hold that briefing? Why were the people who work on Operation Soteria not allowed to come to Parliament to brief Members?

The Government say that Operation Soteria is something that they are doing, but it is not just a check box—"Oh, we've done Operation Soteria." We have to know what people are saying, so we can scrutinise it. What they have said so far is that the system needs an entire overhaul. That is what I will be looking for.

6.6 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): I wish we did not have to debate a topic like this on International Women's Day, but given how the system has been failing victims of rape, it is right that we do. I do not think that the country has ever had a good enough approach to the victims of violence and sexual violence towards women and girls—not successive Governments, not the police, not the Crown Prosecution Service and not wider society. I will return to that point.

I looked at the figures yesterday. In the year ending 2003, there were 11,445 rapes against females in this country. In 2020, there were close to 53,000 rapes against females in this country. I accept that, as with all crime, people will say that that is partly a result of better systems for reporting and recording, but that can only be part of it. In only two of the years between 2003 and 2020 was there a downward trend; in every other year the figures were up on the year before. They have gone up further still, and our conviction rate is much lower.

While preparing for this debate, I went back to some of the very powerful cases that I have heard about from constituents. Unfortunately, such is the nature of these crimes that there are too many for me to cite, but I have picked three. For one constituent, it was three years

before their case reached court. During that time, they were told not to have therapy; they were then told that they could have therapy, as long as the therapist's notes were made available for the defence lawyer of the person who had raped them. They were told that they should not apply for compensation; they were told that they should not talk about the trial; they were told that they might not be able to watch the trial.

I just cannot imagine going through that sort of process after having had this done to you—having justice denied for so long and all these obstacles put in your way. I can imagine why it is easier to let it go and think, "I don't want to carry on with this, because it feels like the system works for the perpetrator rather than for the victim."

I had another constituent who was raped by someone who had already had six "no further action" notices for six separate assaults against six different women. I had a third constituent who summed up the system pretty well: she said that the police do not feel that they can put forward a case that the CPS will not go for, and the CPS will not put forward a case that it thinks a jury will not go for. She felt strongly that when a case gets to the jury, it is in the hands of people's prejudices. She quoted statistics from the findings of a 2018 attitudes survey. One in three people had said that they did not think rape as a result of coercion was actually rape, one in four had said that rape in a long-term relationship was not rape, and one in 10 had not been sure whether raping someone who was drunk or asleep constituted rape.

The system is undoubtedly failing victims, and I therefore welcome a number of measures that the Government are taking. I welcome the scorecards, because I think that the data will really help. I welcome the funding for rape support services, and—it is ridiculous even to have to say this—I welcome the increased emphasis that will be placed on the suspect's behaviour rather than the victim's credibility. I note what has been said about the proposal for a seven-year minimum sentence, and I note that in 2020 68% of people received sentences longer than seven years and the average was 10 years. I also think it right that the Government are considering the introduction of specialist rape offence courts.

We rightly talk about how to fix the system to ensure that perpetrators are given the punishment that they deserve, that this is a quick process, and that we have a high conviction rate. However, this is another area in which we should spend more time talking about prevention. It seems to me, as I am sure it does to everyone else, that a boy who grows up respecting girls and is taught about healthy relationships is unlikely to become a man who rapes women and keeps them in toxic relationships. When Ofsted conducted a review of sexual abuse in schools, it found that many children and young people did not bother to report such abuse because it was so common that they did not see the point of doing so.

I think that as well as dealing with the people who have committed these crimes, we should focus much more on how we control what children and young people can access on the internet, what they can see in video games, and how they observe men behaving in both private and public spheres. Teaching boys how to behave in the right way will give us the best chance of securing the society with zero tolerance for rape that the Government rightly say they want.

6.12 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I am glad to be able to speak about this Labour motion in support of victims of rape and sexual violence on International Women's Day, although it is ironic that on a day when we celebrate the role and importance of women in society, we also hear that women and girls continue to suffer rape and sexual violence.

This Government are not doing enough to tackle this issue. The response to a freedom of information request submitted by the *South Wales Argus*, my local newspaper, to Gwent police revealed that in 2021, 587 incidents of rape were reported, only five of which resulted in charges, and 436 are still under investigation. That is completely unacceptable. If the crime were murder, there would be a public outcry at those appalling figures, but crimes of rape and sexual violence can be as devastating as murder for the victims and their families, and can leave mental and physical scars that will take years to heal, if they ever do.

However, those figures represent only a small fraction of the real problem. Rape Crisis, an umbrella charity for rape crisis centres across England and Wales, has stated:

"More than 1 in 5 women and 1 in 20 men have experienced rape or sexual assault as adults."

This is an epidemic, in which not enough is being done. It needs to be treated seriously, and Labour in power will do that. Meanwhile, the Conservatives' record speaks, loudly, for itself. Rape prosecutions and convictions have reached historic lows, and the typical delay between an offence of rape and the completion of the resulting criminal case exceeded 1,000 days for the first time in 2021, under this Tory Government. Make no mistake, Madam Deputy Speaker: the Government's actions so far, and their continuing inaction, speak more clearly and loudly than any words spoken from the Conservative Benches today. Labour will guarantee 33,000 extra sitting days to get case loads down, and the creation of a Minister for rape and sexual violence survivors. We will also remove the legal barriers that prevent victims of domestic abuse from receiving the help that they need through legal aid. Labour will fast-track rape cases to ensure that people are not waiting years for their day in court, because justice delayed is justice denied. We cannot allow on any level a culture of obstruction and delay to prevent that justice from being delivered.

At the moment, rapists and perpetrators of sexual violence are walking free as victims are dropping court cases because of delays, a lack of confidence in the system and the threat of being confronted in their local area by their attacker. Victims of rape face having their phones taken from them by the police and not returned for many months. This leads to further anxiety and to another avenue of communication and comfort being closed off to the victim. Again, this is simply unacceptable, as the victim is made to feel vulnerable and alone at a time when they should be supported and reassured to know that their attacker is being brought to justice swiftly and punished accordingly.

My constituents in Newport West want to know that they are safe. They want to know that if something terrible happens to them they will be supported and that they will have justice. Under the current Government, that justice is lacking, and people's faith in our justice

system has been eroded. Max Hill QC, the Director of Public Prosecutions, has described how the criminal justice system that deals with rape and sexual assault is creating a "crisis of public trust". The Conservative Government have hit a historic low and I urge them to raise their game for the sake of all women and girls across the UK. We must protect and support them all.

6.16 pm

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): This is an appropriate day on which to have this important debate because as we celebrate International Women's Day we also need to recognise the particular challenges and threats that women and girls sadly face in our society. We all want the experience of victims of rape and serious sexual offences in the criminal justice system to improve. We also want to ensure that the guilty are convicted of these offences. That has to be done in a way, which, in our criminal system, safeguards the rights of an accused person, who is of course innocent until the offence is proved against them. That is always a difficult balancing act, and particularly difficult in sensitive cases such as these. I say that as someone who has probably prosecuted and defended more rape and serious sexual offences than most people currently in this House. This requires investment in resource, in training and in sensitivity.

The best way we can increase the level of rape convictions in this country is to improve the quality of the evidence gathering, so that when the files go to the Crown Prosecution Service to take a decision to charge, more cases meet the threshold. We cannot lower the threshold in any criminal case. The threshold for prosecution is the same for any criminal case, and so it must remain. In other words: is there sufficient legally admissible evidence for a reasonable prospect of conviction? The key problem is that not enough cases so far are reaching that threshold.

Interestingly, when cases of rape and serious sexual offences are charged and get to trial, the conviction rate when they go before a jury is broadly similar to that for other serious offences of violence. A positive thing about our jury system is that, whatever polling there is about the misconceptions about rape that allegedly exist in general society, once the jurors have been empanelled, sworn their oath, heard the evidence and listened to the directions of the judge, they take their responsibilities very seriously indeed and generally set those misconceptions aside. We must ensure that we keep the Judicial Studies Board's model guidance to judges up to date, and that the judiciary take that seriously themselves.

The problem is getting these cases to the Crown court in the first place. It is appropriate that the chief inspector of the Crown Prosecution Service and the senior inspector of Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary gave evidence to the Justice Committee today, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) said earlier. They gave compelling evidence about the challenges that we face. There is much being done. The end-to-end rape review is important, Operation Soteria is important and they said that there was a willingness for there to be greater collaboration across the system, but there are still issues.

I want to highlight one issue in particular, which is the question of delays. We have talked about the significant amount of delay, with an average of 706 days from the reporting of the offence to the start of the trial. It is

interesting when we break that figure down, because the evidence we heard from the chief inspectors was that there is an average of 218 days from the start of investigation to sending the file to the Crown Prosecution Service for a charging decision. From receipt of the papers by the Crown Prosecution Service to a decision to charge: 21 days. From the decision to charge to the first appearance in court: 13 days. From the decision to charge to the first pre-trial and preparation hearing: 30 days. A plea is entered and directions are given, but it is another 320-odd days before the final disposal at trial.

That shows us where the problems are. On that evidence, it is not within the CPS. I pay tribute to the priority that the current Director of Public Prosecutions has given to rape and serious sexual offences, but the evidence is very clear that the biggest attrition rate, the biggest drop-out rate, among complainants comes in the period between reporting a case to the police and it going to the CPS for charge.

That means the police need to handle these cases much more sensitively. Good chief constables recognise that, and I also find it inexplicable why on earth any force would not have a RASSO unit. There are proper obligations to disclose unused material as part of the checks and balances in our system, but there is no reason why it should not be done speedily and sensitively. We need to make sure that happens, and we also need better training on proper evidence gathering, asking the right questions, probing intelligently to find supporting evidence and working with specialist Crown prosecutors to build a case.

That will get more cases over the charging line, and then we need to look at the delays in bringing cases to trial, which is where there is merit in exploring specialist courts and making sure we have enough ticketed judges and recorders to do it, as well as enough experienced advocates both prosecuting and defending—that is important to the experience of complainants, to just outcomes in such cases and to confidence in the system.

These are important matters that we need to address, and I hope the chief inspectors will come back to our Committee once the Government have responded to their joint thematic report, which raises important points and is obviously something this House will want to consider again in the future.

6.22 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I pay tribute to Labour Front Benchers for calling this important debate on International Women's Day. On a day when women and girls across the world have much to celebrate, it is a tragedy that we are talking about something so horrific, but it is right to do so given that we are where we are.

The awesome, inspiring and very moving address from President Zelensky is a reminder that sexual violence against women and girls is always a huge risk in war. Where a power ignores UN conventions and bombs the routes that refugees are taking out of cities, I am afraid we cannot expect that power to behave any better when it comes to respecting women and girls.

It is reckoned that 5 million people in England and Wales, principally women, have been victims of sexual assault. A third of girls aged 16 to 18 say they have experienced unwanted sexual touching at school. We

have heard many Members say how the justice system lets down women and girls, too. There were an estimated 139,000 rapes in 2019-20, with fewer than 59,000 reported and only 2.4% resulting in a conviction. Every one of those statistics is a woman, a girl, an individual, a victim, and almost every one of those statistics is a woman, a girl, an individual, a victim who got no justice, which is an utter outrage.

Men often do not think about the impact of sexual violence on how women and girls think about the mundane things of everyday life. It feels like spring today but, when autumn comes around and the nights draw in, it is a mundane, perfunctory decision for women and girls to change their routes and practices of where they go, when they go and who they go with. That is somehow a normal way of managing their time and their life to cope with such utter wickedness. It fills me with shame, as a man, that we live in that kind of society, where it is not safe for women and girls to go about their normal daily lives. If we are not safe, we are not free.

What makes me, and women and girls, angry is that we see precious little action. I am trying to be sensitive in what I say here. In my time as a Member of Parliament, we have lost two precious colleagues in Jo Cox and David Amess, and we grieve them and miss them. The response of the authorities, the security services and the police to those horrific murders was to strengthen our security; we see police turning up at our surgeries, and I am grateful for that and it is welcome. The response to well-publicised appalling acts against women—rapes and murders—is what? It is the Metropolitan police taking action against the women who protest. It is this Government choosing not to make misogyny a hate crime when they had the option to do so. It is the failure of us all to tackle the attitudes among boys and men towards women—the hon. Member for Wantage (David Johnston) mentioned that—and the objectification of women, through films, TV and the internet. When some outrage happens and a woman is raped or murdered, people on the internet will say, “Oh, it is not all men.” Stuff that, every man has responsibility. Every man has a responsibility to check their own attitudes, reflect upon them and make sure that we seek—for ourselves and the young men we raise in this society—to be respectful towards women and see them as equal in every way.

On International Women's Day, I want to take a moment to refer to the reality of our need to focus on the plight of girls around the world who are subject to, or at risk of, forced child marriage and the violence associated with that. It was my privilege earlier today to speak to Evi Gosden and Sheiba Aigiomawu from Compassion UK, whose work in educating girls and their families in countries such as Uganda so that girls are kept safe from the cruel practice of forced child marriage is so utterly important. I encourage Members and indeed anyone paying attention to this speech to support Compassion UK's work, which is done via sponsorship of girls and their communities, and is hugely effective.

I will make a final, related comment. In many developing countries, women die in childbirth in greater numbers and more children do not make it past infancy. The child survival work of Compassion UK, supported by the UK Government through international aid—hooray!—runs

[Tim Farron]

the risk of not being renewed after December. Why is that? It is because of the cuts in international aid. It is no good us, on International Women's Day, speaking up in favour of protecting women and girls here in this country or overseas if we will not match those words with actions that sometimes bear a financial cost.

6.27 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I rise to speak in favour of this motion, on International Women's Day. I recently held a summit on this issue, and the public made it clear to me that the Conservative Government are failing women. The consequence of this failure is felt on a personal level by women and girls. It erodes their confidence to be alone in public, in the dark, and it instils a fear that I find it hard to imagine many men would be able to comprehend.

Last autumn, I conducted a survey in my constituency on rape and sexual violence. Several hundred people responded and I was shocked to learn that 69% of respondents carried their keys in their hands on their way home; that 45% sent their current location to a friend or loved one; and that 66% would call someone while walking alone. Although small in scale, these acts are, unfortunately, increasingly necessary, due to a rise in violence against women and girls; this is not helped by the flattening of rape prosecution rates, high-profile murders such as that of Sarah Everard and the cuts that have decimated our public services.

On a local level, Warwickshire police abolished their specialist RASSO unit nine years ago, in 2013. On a national level, the number of staff at the Crown Prosecution Service fell by a third between 2010 and 2019. Successive Conservative Governments have presided over a series of cuts at both ends of the national-local spectrum, which has eroded this country's ability to counter VAWG. With two out of five police forces lacking a RASSO unit—I referred to that in my point to the Minister—these cuts have made securing justice for gender-based violence and sexual assault, in effect, a postcode lottery.

The results of the cuts make for grim reading. As we have heard, a mere 1.3% of rape cases are prosecuted, despite the number of rapes reported to the police being at record highs. I am appalled to confirm that Warwickshire is reported as having the lowest rape conviction rate of any county in England and Wales, with only seven of just 15 cases pursued by Warwickshire police resulting in conviction. It is no surprise that we see a strong correlative link between cuts to local services and stark decreases in prosecution and conviction rates. It has led to what the Victims' Commissioner, Dame Vera Baird QC, has described as the "effective decriminalisation of rape." That is a shameful record by any standard.

With a policing culture now accustomed to the effective decriminalisation of rape, it is particularly grotesque to see the ways in which certain elements in police forces perceive themselves to be above the law. A year after the tragic murder of Sarah Everard at the hands of the Met police officer Wayne Couzens, we are reminded of it by the revelations at Charing Cross police station and others. Indeed, a Warwickshire police officer currently faces allegations of inappropriate contact with a domestic abuse victim.

This matter needs to be treated with the urgency it deserves. It is unfathomable that the Government are preparing to close down the Nightingale courts, including the one in my constituency, when the average time taken in the courts to deal with a crime rose by 15% in the three months up to September 2021, to 620 days. This matter needs to be addressed through the education of boys and young men, but I do not have the time to develop that theme now. The Minister may well justify the backlog because of the temporary closure of many courts during the covid-19 pandemic, but the Government's savage cuts between 2010 and 2019, when half of all courts in England and Wales were closed, allowed for 27,000 fewer sitting days than there were in 2016. The blame lies clearly at the door of successive Conservative Governments.

Labour would extend the use of Nightingale courts beyond April 2022, to begin to reduce the court delays and guarantee 33,000 extra sitting days to get the case loads down. To spur this initiative on, we would appoint a specific Minister for rape and sexual violence survivors. If victims have a specific voice in Government, fighting for their interests and turbocharging the required reforms, they will hopefully begin to feel that the law and the state are on their side.

In a victims-led approach to reform, we would introduce a victims Bill to establish the victims code in law. We would increase sentences for rapists and stalkers and create specific new offences for street sexual harassment and sex for rent. Making legal aid available to victims and fast-tracking rape and serious sexual assault cases through the court system would bring about much-needed justice—and fast. These are the elements for which the public are calling and the points that were fed back to me at my recent summit.

Having promised to introduce a victims Bill in 2016, the Government seem to have lost their grip on law and order, and in particular on violence against women and girls, which is increasingly endemic. The Government have had more than six years to bring a Bill forward, but it seems clear that only Labour has the drive, ambition and impetus to deliver justice for the victims of sexual assault and violence against women.

6.33 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I rise to speak in this important debate on behalf of women and girls in Dulwich and West Norwood who have little confidence that the Government, the police and the courts are there to protect them. The shocking failure to prosecute the horrific offence of rape is one of the clearest manifestations of the ways in which this Government are failing women and girls. A woman can be raped, and in less than 2% of cases will the perpetrator face any consequences. It might as well be legal.

Women and girls see a terrible continuum from the casual, everyday street harassment that they experience, to the culture of sexual harassment in schools exposed so clearly by the Everyone's Invited campaign, to the horrific murders that have reached the headlines in recent months: of Sarah Everard, Bibaa Henry, Nicole Smallman and Sabina Nessa, and of the many more whose names we do not know—women going about their daily lives, walking home, celebrating a birthday or meeting a friend for a drink on a Friday night.

Again and again, the Government have responded with warm words but the action has fallen short. They have said that they will create a new offence of sexual harassment in a public place if there is evidence that it is needed. I am not sure what additional evidence the Government need than the millions of women up and down the country who rose up a year ago to say that street harassment blights their lives and makes them feel unsafe in their own neighbourhoods and town centres. The promised legislation to criminalise curb crawling has failed to materialise. There has been no meaningful follow up response to the Everyone's Invited revelations.

Women look at the reality of the framework of protection on which they should be able to rely, and they see story after story of police officers behaving in ways that are as bad as the offenders whom they are supposed to apprehend—sharing pictures of murdered women on a WhatsApp group, making advances as they report sexual harassment, being charged with and convicted of rape, and, most shockingly of all, using a warrant card to facilitate rape and murder. Yet there is still no statutory inquiry into the culture of misogyny in the police, and no commitment to culture change.

The courts are no better. I spoke recently with a constituent who is the victim of horrific domestic abuse. She told me that the central London family court is so clogged up that no one ever answers the phone. The Government must urgently act to give women and girls confidence that they are safe at home, on our streets and in public spaces; that if they are the victim of any type of misogyny, from curb crawling to street harassment to rape, they will be listened to and believed; and that the offence will be investigated, evidence gathered and everything possible done to bring a successful prosecution so that perpetrators are always held to account.

Delivering this change requires much more than simply a change of management approach at the Crown Prosecution Service. It requires a wholesale change in the culture of policing and the practices of the criminal justice system. It also requires a much greater commitment to prevention, particularly in educating boys and young men on respect and consent.

Finally, today is International Women's Day, and as we debate the shamefully poor rape prosecution rate in this country, we must also stand in solidarity with women and girls in other parts of the world. I want to mention in particular women in Ethiopia, who over the past 18 months have been subjected to an horrific conflict, which has seen the routine and systematic use of rape as a weapon of war. The British Government must do everything possible to end the use of sexual violence in conflict, working through the UN and providing humanitarian and trauma support to victims. They can do that most effectively from a position of strength at home. The Government must show that rape is a heinous offence and that perpetrators must always be held to account by getting their own house in order and leading by example.

As a mother of two teenage girls, I reflect on how I always tell them as they leave home in the morning to "stay safe" as if that is somehow solely their responsibility. It is not. We cannot tolerate any longer a society in which women and girls are subjected to harassment on a daily basis, far too often escalating into abuse and rape, and in which the institutions and systems that should be there to protect them fail so dismally to do so.

6.38 pm

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): I thank all those who have spoken today, exposing the real challenges that women face in the justice system and the challenges that women face everywhere. Today, on International Women's Day, I want to pay particular tribute to the women and girls of Ukraine, particularly after that heartfelt and emotional address from President Zelensky—the women staying behind to take up arms and the women fleeing for their lives, often with young children or elderly parents. Our hearts and support go out to them at this difficult time.

We have heard some powerful speeches in this debate. We have heard how the justice system lets women and girls down. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) pointed out the complete lack of specialist health services for victims of serious sexual assault. It was a passionate speech emphasising, as ever, her wealth of knowledge, but also the need for a complete overhaul of the justice system. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) drew a comparison with the victims of murder; the victims of serious sexual assault and rape can be left with long-held scars of a different kind, yet it is viewed so differently and not taken as seriously.

I welcome the comments of the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), the Chair of the Justice Committee, who spoke strongly about the impact of delays on victims and the need for specialist courts, something that Labour is firmly behind and pushing the Government on. The hon. Members for Wantage (David Johnston) and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) raised the critical issue of men's responsibility to change behaviours and of shifting our culture and society. My hon. Friends the Members for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) and for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) both spoke powerfully about startling statistics and how action from Government falls woefully short.

"You're safer staying in that abusive relationship than you are trying to get out. The aftermath is 100 per cent worse."

Those are the words of a survivor of attempted murder, rape and domestic abuse. Rachel shared her 16-year living nightmare with me, the flashbacks and nightmares of which are so traumatic that she has tried to take her own life several times. A survivor of the most abhorrent crimes anyone could face believes that staying in her abusive relationship was better than facing our criminal justice system. I ask hon. Members to think about that for a few minutes.

Today, on this International Women's Day, we are breaking the bias of inequality that overwhelmingly costs women their lives, their hopes and their futures. That must begin with our justice system—a system that discredits and destroys, treating victims like criminals despite having had their own bodies used against them, a system that is now punishing victims and excusing criminals. We see victims cross-examined and left feeling ashamed as they report the atrocities that have happened to them.

That happened to a woman I met earlier this year, who was raped at just 19 years old. Eight years after the incident, Sophie bravely reported it to the police. It took the CPS 11 months to decide to charge and another two and half years to get to court. Then, following the

[Anna McMorris]

poor advice of a court attendant, Sophie was told she should attend court and take the stand. She was there for two hours, sitting behind a screen to protect herself from seeing the perpetrator, whom she had not seen for nearly ten years.

The first thing Sophie was asked to do by the defence was to open an evidence booklet placed in front of her to a particular page. There in front of her was the picture of the man who had violently abused her. It was a barbaric scare tactic used to throw her off. The re-traumatisation meant she was unable to recall important details of the incident. He was found not guilty. Sophie's case very disturbingly demonstrates the systemic failures at every level of our criminal justice system, from the police to the CPS to the court witness assistant.

Just over a week ago, the criminal justice joint inspection report on rape was released. It identified that most victims feel as if they are the ones being investigated or standing trial, rather than the focus being on the behaviour of the accused. The courts are complicit in the abuse that women face. That needs to change, and it needs to change now.

Today we are breaking the bias that sees victims subject to vengeful stereotypes. My own constituent was portrayed as a scornful, resentful wife in court when her husband committed fraud, forging her signature countless times. Helen lost everything: her home, her friends, her career. Her father died and her mother was sectioned, both broken by watching their daughter go through such an ordeal. Her husband was found not guilty. She tells me she is still living with the shame she was made to feel—the humiliation, being called a liar, and tainted by someone else's dirt. Helen is just one of the survivors I speak to every day as shadow victims Minister: women faced with unimaginable circumstances. I am always in awe of their bravery in speaking out about their experiences.

It is these women who gave me the courage to speak out about what I went through. So today I want to break not only the bias but the stigma. This abuse really can happen to anyone. I recently gave a very personal interview about my own experience in a controlling, emotionally abusive and coercive relationship. I consider myself a strong, independent woman with a thick skin, having to navigate the brutal reality of being a woman in politics, yet it still happened to me. I still felt trapped, trying also to navigate the lying, the cheating, the gaslighting and the controlling behaviour—living in a permanent state of anxiety, unable to function at times, and not knowing what was real or what was not. It took all my strength to leave the relationship I was in. I left one evening last year with just a single bag under my arm.

Many will not understand what it takes to leave that kind of relationship or why you stay so long. Being able to talk about it now without fear and without shame is as important as it is liberating. But that is not to understate the constant trauma both during and after, and its impact on the people around you. I want to thank my friends, my family and my brilliant team for being there.

All the women I have spoken to have one thing in common: they are determined to speak out about the injustice that they face to drive positive change. Deep-rooted inequality that makes society unsafe for women and

girls is not just a problem for women and girls to resolve. We must remember that; it is everyone's problem. Our culture must change so that we are able to talk about these relationships and the many women still feeling trapped, abused and controlled can see that there is hope, however small, that there is strength in exposing their vulnerability and pain, and that they will get to the other side. That is what breaks down stigmas.

I stand here on International Women's Day proud of what I have achieved—that I can stand here as a shadow Minister and advocate on behalf of Rachel, Sophie and Helen. They are just a few of so many thousands of women who need this Government to step up to address the fundamental and institutionalised flaws in the justice system, to toughen sentences for spiking and introduce minimum sentences for rape and stalking, to implement Labour's survivors' package for victims of rape and serious sexual violence, and to begin an immediate review into setting up specialist rape offence courts to help to clear the significant Crown Court backlog of rape cases. There is no breaking the bias without first breaking the stigmas. Only then can we even begin to restore trust in the justice system.

6.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Rachel Maclean): It is real privilege to be able to close this debate and, in particular, to follow the speech by the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorris). It is the first time that I have heard her story, but I am sure that she will have made an enormous difference by speaking out today in the way she has, and I commend her courage. She is absolutely right to say that she will be changing attitudes by addressing the stigma and breaking the bias, so I want to thank her, as will, I am sure, every Member of the House.

It is a real privilege to close the debate on International Women's Day, and I associate myself with all the remarks that have been made paying tribute to President Zelensky and the incredible women and girls of that amazing country, Ukraine. We stand with them. I never thought when I entered Parliament that I would be addressing the House after a speech such as the one I heard today. None of us has been left unmoved by it.

It is right that we focus on how we support victims and bring perpetrators to justice. I thank everybody who has brought before us the experiences of their constituents and told their stories. Listening to those victims and their experiences is how we drive the change across the justice system that all of us in this House are passionate to achieve, in order to build a fairer society for women and make our streets safer.

Yesterday, many of us attended an event run by Women's Aid—it was a pleasure to see so many Members there. The comments made at that event chimed with me and many others. One of the Spice Girls, Mel B, stood up and said that she had no problem at all standing on a stage at Wembley stadium, singing and performing in front of hundreds of thousands of people, but that was nothing compared with the trauma of having to tell her story about her abusive marriage and everything she has gone through. Continuing to allow these victims and these incredible survivors to come forward, supporting them, and working to achieve the change we all want is how we will change the system.

I thank all Members who have spoken in this debate. They have raised a number of points. Time does not allow me to address all of them in detail, but I will start with the issue of stalking, which has been mentioned by many Members. Stalking is a very serious matter that has a broad spectrum of manifestations. We are, of course, looking at this issue in the context of domestic abuse, and also of harassment. That is why we awarded £11.3 million to police and crime commissioners to fund programmes for domestic abuse perpetrators and perpetrators of stalking, whether or not it takes place in a domestic abuse context. A wide range of sentences are currently imposed for stalking offences, reflecting the broad spectrum of manifestations of this behaviour. The most serious offences could result in a maximum of 14 years' imprisonment.

We have discussed extensively in this Chamber the issue of stalking protection orders. As hon. Members know, I recently wrote to all police forces making clear where they are not using those tools appropriately, and that they need to use the levers at their disposal in order to properly keep women and girls safe. The grant rate for those orders is very high, and where they are being granted, the police feel they are a very useful measure, but there is more we can do.

We have also discussed the issue of spiking. We have all become familiar with these new and concerning reports of needle spiking, which is a terrifying experience—something that I think we all find appalling, frightening and disgusting. It is a reasonably new phenomenon, which is why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is working with the police to better understand the exact nature of spiking; what is actually happening with that crime? We are working to make sure we record these incidents through the crime recording framework, and are also urgently considering the case for a criminal offence targeting spiking directly. There are already a range of offences on the statute book that the police can use to prosecute this behaviour, but we are all concerned with making sure that those offences are used and we will not hesitate to legislate if necessary.

David Johnston: My constituent Sharon Gaffka is involved in a campaign on spiking, having been spiked twice herself. She now has more than 1,000 testimonies from people ranging from the age of 14 to 65. It is not always a sexual offence—sometimes friends do it to each other because they think it is a bit of a laugh to get a reaction—but I wonder whether I can get my constituent to share those testimonies with my hon. Friend to help inform the Government's understanding of what is going on here.

Rachel Maclean: Of course. I thank my hon. Friend very much and I would be delighted to do that. I am working across Government with colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care, the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Education and so on to have a cross-Government response to this matter.

Members have raised the issue of sentencing in a range of contexts. It is important to note that the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which is passing through the House, will ensure that serious sexual and violent offenders serve two thirds of their sentence in prison, instead of half. Indeed, a number of other measures in that Bill strengthen the management of sex

offenders, including by enabling electronic monitoring requirements to be imposed on those who pose a risk through sexual harm prevention orders and sexual risk orders, if necessary.

It is important that our criminal justice system catches up from the impacts of the pandemic. Our decisive action in the courts has kept justice moving. That is why we invested a quarter of a billion pounds to support recovery in the last financial year, and 30 Nightingale courtrooms are to be extended until March next year as we work across Government to continue our efforts to tackle the impact of covid-19 on the justice system. The new victims Bill, which we are introducing as quickly as possible, will bring about a cultural shift so that victims' experiences are central to how our society thinks about and responds to crime. We want to ensure that the Bill tackles the things that victims most care about.

Members have referenced health, which is a vital component of our strategy to provide the tailored support that victims of rape and other serious sexual offences need. Through the work being carried out by my colleagues in the Ministry of Justice, the victims Bill consultation is looking closely at the commissioning of community-based services, including the role of health bodies. That consultation is now being analysed and we will bring forward a draft Bill as soon as possible.

I will reference an important piece of work from my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care through the women's health strategy. The Department will appoint our first ever women's health ambassador for England, whose role will be to focus on raising the profile of women's health, increasing awareness and bringing in a range of collaborative voices. Members will know that I work closely with Women's Aid, which is campaigning on better mental health support for victims of trauma and sexual offences. That forms another important component of the domestic abuse plan that we are bringing forward.

It is important to reference that we on the Government Benches fully accept that the current data shows that the system is not working as well as it could be. We have consistently been honest and transparent about that. It is only by doing that that we will be able to bring about the change that is desperately needed.

Sir Robert Neill: I am glad that my hon. Friend references data. Will she take on board the fact that the joint thematic report from the two inspectorates specifically references the need to do more on data in this field and ensure that that is in the Government's response?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. We are reviewing those reports and others to ensure we have that data at our fingertips and bring forward the response that is required for victims. We are not complacent. We know there is more to do. This is the third time in the space of a week that I have personally stood in this Chamber discussing these very important issues. I am happy to continue to do so, because the work we are doing through Operation Soteria and some of the other workstreams is groundbreaking. I am proud to be associated with it, but we will not rest until we get the result that we need.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

[*Rachel Maclean*]

That this House commemorates International Women's Day; regrets that under this Government conviction rates for rape have reached a historic low and that the typical delay between reporting an offence of rape and the completion of the resulting criminal case is over 1,000 days; calls on the Government to introduce minimum sentences for stalking and rape, to raise minimum sentencing for spiking and to implement Labour's survivors' package for victims of rape and serious sexual violence to restore trust in the criminal justice system; and further calls on the Government to begin an immediate assessment of the impact of setting up specialist rape offence courts on the significant Crown Court backlog of rape cases, as recommended by HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Scotland Act 2016 (Social Security) (Adult Disability Payment and Child Disability Payment) (Amendment) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 24 January, be approved.—(*Scott Mann.*)

Question agreed to.

Consett Energy from Waste Plant

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Scott Mann.)

7 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I reflect the comments of other hon. Members who have spoken in saying that it puts everything into perspective at every level to speak in the same Chamber to which President Zelensky has just spoken.

After many attempts in the Adjournment debate ballot, I am glad to have secured this important debate, which concerns a local waste to energy facility—a topic that is close to my constituents' hearts. The planning permission for it to be built in Consett in my constituency was soundly rejected by Durham county councillors last year after thousands of local residents objected to the proposed plant on the Hownsgill industrial estate in the Delves Lane area. That movement was spearheaded by the unwavering hard work of a huge number of local people. I particularly thank my local Delves Lane councillors, Michelle Walton and Angela Sterling, whose campaign I backed from the start. It was a real community effort, however, and thousands of people were involved in pushing objections and leading lots of local groups.

Although I acknowledge that Members of Parliament have no specific powers with regard to local planning permissions and council decisions, I have none the less been blown away by the huge outpouring from local people—mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, grandparents, residents—who have coalesced around an issue that they see as important for our local community. That has been incredible to see, and it has marked another occasion where hundreds of local people have come together and made me incredibly proud to be the Member of Parliament for North West Durham.

Sadly, this debate is not about celebrating a hard-fought win, but occurs in the shadow of a potential appeal that is being prepared against Durham County Council's decision to reject the building of the plant. As a result of the reignition of the local debate against the backdrop of the potential appeal, I decided to conduct a survey of my constituents' views last week. In just a couple of days, I received hundreds and hundreds of responses. A pattern has emerged, which I can summarise: they say that no means no when it comes to the proposed Consett incinerator, they want their views to be listened to, and they do not want the result of local democratic action by the council to be overturned by those who seek to ignore them.

I will read a couple of comments that constituents posted in response to my survey. One constituent explained that

"the planning committee made their views clear, as did the people of Consett and this decision needs to be respected."

Another constituent explained that the plant will cause "noise...next to houses, schools, health facilities, clean air"

and is right between major residential areas of the town. Another constituent put it even more concisely and confirmed that the Consett incinerator

"has no place in our town and we do not want it here."

Well over 95% of people who responded to the surveys and work that I have conducted are implacably opposed to the plant.

After synthesising all those views and asking people what we should do instead, it is clear that my constituents are behind the general drift of Government policy. The Government believe in reduce, reuse, recycle—that is the priority that we are driving—not blight and burn, which is clearly what is being proposed.

The Government have also done a great job in recent years in highlighting the environmental agenda. We led COP26 in Glasgow by really driving through—not just for Britain but internationally—a desire to see emissions reduced and to help protect the environment. Over 100 countries have now committed to ending deforestation. We have seen a big shift from carbon-intensive power generation and an end to new coal financing. Two hundred countries agreed to the pact to keep 1.5° alive, along with cutting methane emissions by 30%.

It is particularly interesting to look at how far we have come. Britain has led the world in trying to reduce our carbon emissions, and recently that shift has been even more stark. When the UK took over the leadership of COP a couple of years ago, only about 30% of the world was covered by the new targets, but that figure is now about 90%. This Government have also been keen to really push forward sensible environmental changes, with things such as animal welfare legislation—for example, the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, which I have supported in this House.

That does not mean that we should jump to a position of wanting immediately to ban all incineration. There is a case for it in a limited number of circumstances, particularly given the need for certain medical waste and things like that to be incinerated. However, the Government are driving for a two-thirds reduction in the amount of waste sent to incineration and to landfill by 2030, so why start to create new facilities? It does not even look as though this will be a long-term solution for the communities I represent, or perhaps even for the developers. Instead, we need to be concentrating on using less and less each year.

As you can see, Mr Deputy Speaker, the Government have demonstrated their commitment to the environment and so have my constituents. Everybody is in agreement—my constituents and the Government—about the unattractiveness of incinerators and, actually, the increasing lack of need for them as we push forward with our agenda.

How did we end up where we are today? I looked through the County Durham plan from 2019, and there was an indication that this land was going to be designated for industrial use. However, the only stipulation imposed on its potential use as an incinerator was that there should be a “degree of restraint” against incineration. That is the only wording about it in that document, on page 256. So we have been left high and dry by a plan, while the rest of the country has moved on environmentally and local people have become implacably opposed. During that time, large numbers of new housing developments—with hundreds of new houses going up—have been proposed within half a mile of the site.

Today, I am calling on the developer to withdraw its appeal, and instead respect the decisions of the democratically elected councillors and of my constituents. There is almost total unanimity among my constituents about backing the Government’s plan to reuse, reduce and recycle, and we want to see as little as possible sent to our landfill or for incineration. Of course, there will

always be a small need for incineration of things such as medical waste as part of a diverse package, but that should be in very limited circumstances.

The general direction the Government are taking is one of reducing waste year on year, and that is what my constituents want. Building more incineration facilities is antithetical to the Government’s broader narrative and their environmental aims. Those aims are strongly supported not only by my constituents but by people across the country, and I believe by those on all sides of the House. Although I understand that the Minister, like me, has no specific role in individual planning cases, and this is obviously a matter for continued debate between the council and the private firms, I do want to ask him to take a broader look at incineration and the Government’s approach to it. Will he also reflect on the views of my local councillors, supported by me, and of my constituents in his response to my debate tonight?

7.9 pm

The Minister for Housing (Stuart Andrew): May I begin by echoing the opening comments of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) about the extraordinary address we received from President Zelensky earlier? That is one of the extraordinary moments I will take away from my time in this House, and we wish him and all the people of Ukraine the very best in their battle for freedom.

May I also congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and thank him for his contribution? My hon. Friend is a tireless campaigner for his constituents on this issue and so many others, from upgrading the A66 to Durham’s county of culture bid. I know he has been trying valiantly for a number of months to secure a debate on this issue, and I believe this could be 10th time lucky. That speaks to the importance of the matter to my hon. Friend and the local councillors he is championing, Michelle Watson and Angela Sterling for Delves Lane ward. It is abundantly clear that that there are strong views among some of his constituents about the merits of this proposed energy plant.

I should also say that Adjournment debates on such matters reflect how important it is that Members continue to hold the Government’s feet to the fire. Pressure from parliamentarians may not always be glamorous, but it is the cogs that make the wheels of Government and local government turn.

Without wishing to pour cold water over the entire debate, I must say from the outset that for propriety reasons I am unable to comment on the specifics of the proposal that is the subject of this debate. I know that an appeal against Durham County Council’s refusal of planning permission for the scheme has been lodged with the Planning Inspectorate, and there will now be a public inquiry into the proposal overseen by an independent planning inspector. It is also possible that if the appeal were recovered it would fall to myself or one of my ministerial colleagues in the Department to decide on the case. So for all those reasons I am afraid I must say that it is not appropriate for me to express any view as to the merits or otherwise of the specific scheme in my hon. Friend’s constituency.

However, given the subject matter of this debate it is worth my saying a bit about the principles that underpin and drive waste planning. The Government are clear that wherever possible waste should be reduced, if not

[Stuart Andrew]

fully prevented; but where prevention is not possible we must prioritise reuse and recycling over energy recovery or disposal to landfill. This sequential approach is at the heart of the Government waste policy, and that is reflected in planning policy requirements for plan making and decision making. In short, every paper bag, every glass bottle and every piece of scrap metal that is recycled is a small victory in our war against waste. That is one reason why the Government are committed to preserving material resources, promoting efficiency, and moving towards a greener, more circular economy.

Our resources and waste strategy sets out the Government's bold ambition to properly manage residual waste in a way that maximises its value. It sets a clear target for 75% of packaging to be recycled by 2030, plus a 65% recycling rate for municipal solid waste. Crucially, this strategy also commits us to minimising any harm done to the environment as a result of managing waste.

This strategy is by no means the total sum of our actions. We are continuing to innovate and find new solutions to old problems in waste management, moving us towards a circular economy. They include a deposit return scheme for drinks containers, extended producer responsibility for packaging, and consistent recycling collections for all homes and businesses, as well as the plastic packaging tax.

On the specifics of planning decisions, councils are guided by the national planning policy for waste, which tasks them with meeting the needs of their areas in managing waste. This includes the need to undertake early and meaningful engagement with residents so that plans reflect as far as possible a collective vision and a set of agreed priorities when planning for sustainable waste management.

The ultimate responsibility for waste planning does sit with councils, and while decisions that they take must be informed by consultation, those are nevertheless their decisions to make. That underscores the importance of community campaigning and the vital role that local MPs such as my hon. Friend and the councillors whom I mentioned have in mobilising constituents for or against all forms of new development, including incinerators and waste plants. It would be nothing short of political suicide for any council to run roughshod over a community that is overwhelmingly against a new facility. Equally, if a council is deliberately hampering a development, the construction of new homes or vital infrastructure, the electorate can communicate its displeasure about that at the next set of local elections.

As my hon. Friend will know, my Department is committed to increasing community engagement with planning applications, digitising much of the old analogue systems and allowing people to see what development is proposed in their area at the touch of a smartphone. That will not just drive up resident engagement but make it easier for communities to voice their opposition or approval for something being built on or near the place that they call home.

Without making any prejudicial comments on the specifics of this live application, I can say that energy from waste is a proven technology and is established as the most common thermal treatment for residual waste—the kind that cannot otherwise be prevented, reused or recycled. While energy from waste plays a vital role in stopping

unnecessary waste from reaching landfill, the Government's view is that it should not be competing with greater efforts by the public to prevent waste, to reuse or to recycle.

In 2019, the incineration of municipal solid waste in energy from waste facilities accounted for more than 6 megatonnes of CO₂-equivalent greenhouse gas emissions, but, according to our best estimates, energy from waste—even in electricity-only mode—is still a better option for processing municipal waste than landfill in terms of greenhouse gas emissions. The Government also want to drive greater efficiency of energy from waste plants by encouraging better use of the heat that they produce in local developments. That brings the additional benefit of helping to reduce the carbon emissions that arise from heating our homes. As hon. Members will know, heat networks form a strategically important part of the Government's plans to reduce carbon and cut heating bills for customers, both domestic and commercial.

When we discuss energy in waste, it is imperative to factor in the regulatory landscape. In October 2020, as part of the circular economy package, the Government legislated to include a permit condition for landfill and incineration operators. The permit meant that those operators cannot accept separately collected paper, metal, glass or plastic for landfill or incineration unless such items have gone through some form of treatment process first and unless there is no better environmental outcome. The condition came on top of existing permit measures that already prevent acceptance of material that is, to all intents and purposes, recyclable.

All energy from waste plants in England are regulated by the Environment Agency and must comply with robust emissions limits set in environmental legislation. As hon. Members might expect, the Environment Agency assesses the emissions from new energy generated by waste plants as part of its permitting process and consults the UK Health Security Agency on every application that it receives. Needless to say, the Environment Agency will never issue an environment permit if a proposed plant has a significant impact on the environment or if it may cause harm to human health.

I hope that, at this stage, my hon. Friend will understand why I need to refrain from touching on the specific circumstances of the matter that he raised, but I hope that my statement has given useful context and background to this important wider debate. I conclude by thanking him again for his thoughtful contribution, which has enriched this debate and provided plenty of food for thought for us in Government. It helps us to understand people's strength of feeling on these individual applications. We are completely committed to reducing waste and supporting the development of the kind of circular economy that regenerates, recycles and reuses whenever possible. I thank him for bringing this issue to the attention of the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We come to the end of a truly historic and emotional day here at Westminster, with President Zelensky's words still ringing in our ears and firmly in our hearts. We were privileged to hear President Zelensky's address today and we stand with him and the very brave people of Ukraine.

Question put and agreed to.

7.20 pm

House adjourned.

ADDENDUM

ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT ZELENSKY

Mr Speaker: Order. We are now meeting informally. As I informed the House earlier, given the exceptional and grave situation I have agreed to a request from President Zelensky of Ukraine to address Members of this House about the situation in his country. That is why I have suspended the formal business of the House in order to hear the President's address. We have also been joined by the Ukrainian ambassador. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

President Zelensky, we have watched the situation unfolding in your country with increasing concern, but also with increasing admiration for the courage and fortitude displayed by you and your fellow Ukrainians. Mr President, you are welcome to address Members of the House of Commons and the Lords. You now have the floor. [*Applause.*]

Volodymyr Zelensky (President of Ukraine) [Translation]: Mr Speaker, Prime Minister, Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, I am addressing all the people of the United Kingdom, a country with a big history. I am addressing you as a citizen and the President of another big country with a dream. I want to tell you about the 13 days of war—a war that we did not start and did not want. However, we have to conduct this war. We do not want to lose what is ours—our country—just as you once did not want to lose yours to the Nazis and you had to fight for Britain.

On day one, at four o'clock in the morning, we were attacked by cruise missiles. Everybody woke up—people, children, the whole of Ukraine—and we have not slept since. We have all been fighting for our country alongside our army.

On day two, we suffered airstrikes, and our heroic military servicemen on the island of Zmiinyi fought when Russian forces demanded that they lay down arms. However, we continued fighting, and they felt the force of our people, who will oppose the occupiers until the end.

The next day, artillery started firing at us. Our army showed us who we are, and we saw who are people and who are beasts.

On day four, we started taking people captive. We did not torture them, remaining humane even on day four of this terrible war.

On day five, the terror against us affected our children and cities, and constant shelling happened around the country, including on hospitals. That did not break us, but gave us a feeling of great certainty.

On day six, Russian rockets fell on Babyn Yar, where the Nazis killed thousands of people during the second world war. Eighty years later, the Russians hit them for the second time.

On day seven, even churches were getting destroyed by shelling.

On day eight, we saw Russian tanks hitting the nuclear power station, and everybody got to understand that this is a terror against everyone.

On day nine, a meeting of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly ended without the result we were looking for. We learned that, unfortunately, alliances do not always work properly, and the no-fly zone was not enforced.

On day 10, Ukrainians started protesting en masse, stopping armoured vehicles with their own hands.

On day 11, children, cities and hospitals were hit with rockets and constant shelling. On that day, we realised that Ukrainians have become heroes—entire cities, children and adults.

On day 12, the losses of the Russian army exceeded 10,000 people killed, including a general. We were given hope that there will be some kind of responsibility for these people in court.

On day 13, the city of Mariupol was attacked by the Russian forces, and a child was killed. The Russians did not allow any food or water, and people started panicking—they do not have water.

Over those 13 days, over 50 children have been killed. Those children could have lived, but these people have taken them away from us.

Ukraine was not looking for this war. Ukrainians have not been looking to become big, but they have become big over the 13 days of this war. We are saving people despite having to fight one of the biggest armies in the world, with its helicopters and rockets. The question for us now is, "To be, or not to be". This Shakespearean question could have been asked over the past 13 days, but I can now give you a definitive answer: it is definitely, "To be".

I remind you of the words that the United Kingdom has already heard because they are important again. We will not give up, and we will not lose. We will fight until the end at sea and in the air. We will continue fighting for our land, whatever the cost. We will fight in the forests, in the fields, on the shores and in the streets. We will fight on the banks of our rivers, like the Dnipro.

We are looking for help from civilised countries, and we are thankful for this help. I am very grateful to you, Boris. Please increase the pressure of sanctions against Russia and please recognise that country as a terrorist state. Please ensure that our Ukrainian skies are safe. Please make sure that you do what needs to be done and what is required by the greatness of your country. I wish my best to Ukraine and to the United Kingdom. [*Applause.*]

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Mr President. On behalf of the House of Commons, I want to thank you for speaking to us and for giving us your clear and powerful perspective on the tragic situation facing you and your fellow Ukrainians. We have debated the situation in Ukraine numerous times in recent weeks, and I know we will continue to do so, and that when we do so next your words will be resonating with us. I want to express the solidarity of the House of Commons with you and your compatriots—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]*—*and we salute the courage of the people of Ukraine. Our prayers are with you.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 8 March 2022

[JUDITH CUMMINS *in the Chair*]

Metropolitan Police: Misogyny and Sexual Harassment

9.30 am

Judith Cummins (in the Chair): Before I call Sarah Olney to move the motion, I remind hon. Members not to make references, beyond passing factual references, to cases that are live before the courts.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered reports of misogyny and sexual harassment in the Metropolitan Police.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Cummins. I extend my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for the debate, especially today, on International Women's Day. The last time I made a speech in Parliament to mark International Women's Day, I was the only female Liberal Democrat MP. Five years later, I find myself a proud member of a party that is, as of December 2021, 70% female. It is my profound belief that stronger female representation in all of our organisations and institutions can improve the lives of women and girls everywhere, and it is that belief, above all else, that propelled me along the path that led to Parliament.

When I was re-elected as the Member for Richmond Park in December 2019, it was a particular pleasure to find that women were in positions of responsibility at every level in the police force. My local borough inspectors in both Kingston and Richmond have at various times been women. The commander of the local basic command unit and her predecessor are women. The Commissioner of the Metropolitan police was a woman. The Home Secretary is a woman. How could my part of London not be a utopia of safety and justice for women? There have, however, been several events over the last year that have caused many of my constituents to be concerned about police officers' attitudes towards women, and I am grateful for the opportunity to talk about that.

Our debate today will be haunted by the memory of Sarah Everard, who was killed by PC Wayne Couzens of the Metropolitan police just over a year ago, on 3 March 2021. Women across London and beyond experienced the news of her disappearance and the discovery of her body with a sense of real dread and fear. I felt it very personally, because the address where Sarah said her final goodbye to her friends was only a few streets away from where I used to live, and I would have pushed my baby daughter's pram along the route where my namesake walked her last walk. Like many other women on that night and many others, she was just walking home. Thousands of women who did not know Sarah felt real grief at the news that her body had been found. Everything that we had heard about the case seemed to speak to our very deepest fears.

But then something even worse happened. Even now, 12 months later, I can still recall how terrifying it was to discover that the man who had been arrested in connection with her murder was a serving Metropolitan police

officer. A person who was employed to keep us safe and enforce the law, and whom we ought to be able to trust, had betrayed that trust in the worst possible way and committed an act of violence against a defenceless woman.

A few days after the arrest, Reclaim These Streets wanted to organise a vigil for Sarah Everard. They approached Lambeth police but were refused permission. A gathering took place anyway; it was attended by police, and it proceeded in an orderly fashion until the early evening, when speeches started to be made from the bandstand and crowds grew denser. A number of arrests were made, and pictures of women being handcuffed while being held down by police spread on social media. For many women, myself included, it looked like an appallingly heavy-handed response to a peaceful vigil. It felt like an insult, on top of an already grievous injury, that the colleagues of the man arrested for murdering a woman were now using force to prevent other women from gathering together to pay tribute to her.

The subsequent report into the police's conduct by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services exonerated the police while criticising politicians and others for expressing their opinions on what had happened. The 60-page report made only the most passing reference to the fact that the man arrested for the incident that sparked the vigil was a police officer; its analysis of the factors that contributed to the event does not include that fact. The report states that public confidence in the police will have been undermined not by the violent actions of a police officer but by "media coverage" and "uninformed commentary" on social media. I remember being furious at the report, not just at its complete failure to reflect the full context of the vigil, but at its implication that those critical of the police response—and I was certainly one of them—were more responsible for undermining trust in the police than was the fact that one of their number had been arrested for murder.

The sense that the police were not acknowledging the implications of the fact that Sarah's murderer was a police officer was compounded by messaging from the Met police about women's safety, following the conviction and sentencing of Wayne Couzens in September 2021. It advised women who were unsure whether a police officer intended to harm them that they could flag down a bus or shout to a passer-by for assistance. It felt not only as though the Met was accepting that it was the norm for women to fear the police, but as though it was not going to take any responsibility for resolving that.

That episode has damaged public confidence in the Met, but we also know that Wayne Couzens is not the only police officer to have committed violence against women. Freedom of information data shows that 2,000 accusations of sexual misconduct, including rape, have been made against Met police officers over the past four years. Only a third of officers who were found guilty have been dismissed. We also know that Couzens was previously convicted of indecent exposure and regularly shared grossly offensive messages over WhatsApp with other police officers. That did not trigger concerns about his conduct.

However, PC Couzens is not the only officer guilty of sharing disturbing messages on social media platforms. Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman, sisters from north London, went missing in June 2020. Their bodies were

[Sarah Olney]

eventually found by family members in a nearby park after police showed little interest in investigating. Two police officers were subsequently jailed for photographing the women's bodies and sharing the photos on WhatsApp, including in a group of 41 police officers. The court released details of how the images had been altered and the accompanying messages, but I will not repeat them here.

A recent Independent Office for Police Conduct report on behaviour at Charing Cross police station revealed "a culture of 'toxic masculinity', sexual harassment and misogyny." One officer had sent a WhatsApp message to a female colleague, saying:

"I would happily rape you".

Another bragged about how he had hit his girlfriend, saying:

"It makes them love you more."

Women officers were belittled and ostracised if they spoke out about this behaviour.

Women fear that an internal culture of misogyny might also affect how police treat members of the public. I have had women get in touch with me to share their experiences of having complaints of stalking and harassment dismissed—even laughed at—by Metropolitan police officers, leaving them feeling powerless and abandoned, and as though the behaviour of their perpetrators had been normalised.

I am grateful to the superintendent of our local basic command unit for taking time to give me her perspective on the issue. She reports a great deal of frustration among police officers that there is so much public attention on and criticism of the police in relation to those events, when the majority of police officers are dedicated, law-abiding and committed to helping their communities. Politicians, particularly Members of Parliament, can relate strongly to the feeling that the damaging actions of a small minority can lead to a disproportionate erosion of public trust in a collection of people, but there is a special responsibility on both law makers and law enforcers to ensure that they uphold the law, in public and in private, and that when there is a visible breach, adequate action is taken swiftly and effectively to denounce the polluting behaviour and to restore public trust.

Public trust is earned; it is not a given. To have it, we must constantly work to uphold the values that are expected of us—both police officers and politicians. Events as horrifying and disturbing as the instances of misogyny described in this speech will, rightly, lead to a large public response. The events of the last year are, after all, not just minor misdemeanours, and I believe that the public's questioning of the police is valid, even if the perceived scale of damaging attitudes among officers is disproportionate.

That is not to say that public trust has been damaged beyond repair. Baroness Louise Casey is leading an independent review of culture and standards in the Met, in the wake of the murder of Sarah Everard. The review offers the Met an opportunity to identify areas in which there is a need for cultural change and to inform a dedicated strategy to tackle misogyny. To ensure that damaging attitudes are given appropriate recognition, I urge that the review's terms of reference be expanded to make specific reference to misogyny, alongside racism and homophobia.

Our police officers need our trust, and the vast majority deserve it. They have a unique job to do, which requires them to put themselves in harm's way without a second thought. I am grateful for the excellent job that so many of them do without recognition or appreciation. They have been badly let down by their colleagues, and I recognise that many of them feel as horrified as I do about what has been revealed over the past year.

The recent IOPC report on Charing Cross revealed a number of factors that contributed to the toxic culture it identified. Those included the fact that officers were often isolated and lacked supervision, and that there was widespread acting up, with officers taking on unofficial promotions. That meant that inappropriate behaviours or attitudes were not properly challenged at the right time, and so they became normalised. That strongly suggests that the lack of appropriately experienced or trained police officers has been a contributory factor in allowing negative behaviours to flourish unchecked, which leads back to the dramatic cuts to policing in the capital over the past decade. We know that the Met has been promised more officers, but reports suggest that recruitment is slow and new, inexperienced officers will not change the picture overnight.

The most high-profile new recruit will be the new Metropolitan Police Commissioner. I look forward to a speedy appointment. If I could end this speech with one ask, it would be that they pay attention to the findings of the IOPC report and to the review by Baroness Casey, and think hard about how to create a culture that reinforces respectful behaviour at all levels, deals robustly with evidence of misogynistic, racist and homophobic attitudes, and, above all, understands the impact that violent or disrespectful behaviour by police officers, even when it is by only a very small proportion, has on their relationship with the public.

9.40 am

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins, and to take part in this debate, which is the first debate in the House of Commons on International Women's Day. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) for securing such an important and relevant debate on this day, about an issue that touches the hearts of many of our constituents and of every single Member of Parliament—if it does not, it should.

It is International Women's Day, Mrs Cummins, so I hope you can forgive me for referring to some of the policewomen in my own constituency. In Hampshire, we are blessed with a wide range of talented police officers who are women, who play an enormous part in tackling the issue that the hon. Member for Richmond Park has brought before us today. They include Olivia Pinkney, who is now chief constable; Karen McManus, who is another very senior officer; Maggie Blyth, who we were fortunate to have in Hampshire and who I believe is now at the Met; and the astonishingly energetic Donna Jones, who is our police and crime commissioner. In Hampshire we are fortunate to have some formidable women helping to lead on these issues, along with a lot of female Members of Parliament. That is important, as I will come to later, because diversity in the police force is crucial.

As the hon. Member for Richmond Park said, we are 12 months on from the murder of Sarah Everard, but over that time we have seen a series of enormously

worrying and public allegations of systemic misogyny in the Met police area, and not only in relation to the murder of Sarah Everard. I echo the hon. Lady's comment that the police officers involved in such behaviour and thinking are in the minority, but even so they erode public trust, which is crucial to UK policing. That is why she is right to bring this debate before the House today, and it is right that the Government are taking the matter so seriously.

This is not just about the murder of Sarah Everard, but the policing of the vigil on Clapham common. I echo the hon. Lady's comments; to me, that policing felt heavy handed. People were there out of frustration and devastation at such a horrific murder, and they wanted to be able to express that publicly. The Met police did not seem to get their response right, and that was worrying. There have also been the murders of Nicole Smallman, Bibaa Henry and Sabina Nessa, and, most recently, the IOPC report into the behaviour of officers at Charing Cross police station. One of those elements might have been an aberration, but the series of them shows that there is a systemic problem. I was pleased to see the Government recognise that in establishing the inquiry. We should not forget the reports of more than 600 allegations of sexual misconduct by Met police officers. That systemic problem seems to run deep.

In trying to ensure we understand how we can re-establish trust in the police, the Government's response has been important. The Home Secretary is right to commission a report into the failings of policing in the Met, but the Government's response has to go wider than that if we are to tackle the problem at its root cause. I was pleased to see the relaunch of the violence against women and girls strategy in the summer. That will have an impact on the way in which violence against women and girls is dealt with throughout Government policy. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister, in responding to this debate, can update the House on how she will ensure that the VAWG strategy really does directly tackle the issues that the hon. Member for Richmond Park has brought up in the debate. If we cannot have faith and trust in enforcement of the law as it stands, the issues that we face here as legislators are all the greater.

I hope that the Minister, when she responds to the debate, can also cover where we are on trying to deal with some of the root causes of the problem that necessitates this debate. I am thinking particularly of the roll-out of mandatory relationships and sex education in our schools. That has been woefully delayed as a result of many issues, including the need to ensure that schools are ready, but also the delays caused by the pandemic. If we are truly to tackle the horrific issues and behaviour under discussion and the normalisation of misogynistic behaviour, we have to get sex and relationships education ingrained in our schools and ingrained in the teaching of every single school-age child.

I hope that the Minister can also address a couple of other issues, because if we are to be able to tackle the issues that have been outlined in the Met, we have to tackle the issues for police forces UK-wide. I have no reason not to believe—in fact, there is a great deal of evidence, including in my own local police force in Hampshire, to suggest—that misogyny is prevalent. Tribunal cases are regularly brought against officers.

Indeed, sexual misconduct and the abusing of power are also prevalent, not only in the Met police but on a much wider level.

I therefore hope that the Minister can touch on what is being done in police forces throughout the country to address this cultural problem, which perhaps reflects society more widely; how this issue is being addressed, given the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that we have with the recruitment of 20,000 new officers into our police forces in the UK; how we are ensuring that the diversity of those officers can drive the change that hon. Members here today are looking for; and the fact that, through disciplinary proceedings—I have to say that my local newspaper, the *Basingstoke Gazette*, has been formidable in its pursuance of transparency in disciplinary proceedings—we are ensuring that there is nowhere to hide for the perpetrators of misogynistic behaviour in any of our police forces around the country. Transparency matters, because sunlight is the greatest form of disinfectant. We have to ensure that, if that minority of officers do transgress, they know not only that disciplinary proceedings will be undertaken but that they will be held to account publicly as members of a public service.

9.48 am

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship today, Mrs Cummins. Happy International Women's Day.

I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) for calling this hugely important debate. I said in the Chamber only last week that it is deeply troubling that we are here discussing yet again our inability as a society to protect 50% of our population from harassment and sexual assault, from rape and from murder. I went on to say that we should be talking about closing the gender pay gap, delivering for working-class women in low-paid sectors such as social care, bettering access to affordable childcare for young mothers, and much more. Now, we are even in Westminster Hall this morning talking about protecting women from those whose job it is to keep us safe. Let that sink in—from those whose job it is to keep us safe.

The retort of the Metropolitan police about a few rotten apples demonstrates that the rot is far more widespread, so let us say it here today clearly: there exists a culture of misogyny in the Metropolitan police. That statement is reinforced in great detail by the Operation Hotton learning report, which states:

"The team at Charing Cross where we identified these problems has now been disbanded, yet we have seen evidence of this behaviour in subsequent investigations. We believe these incidents are not isolated or simply the behaviour of a few 'bad apples'."

It is imperative that the Metropolitan Police Service sheds its natural instinct immediately to deflect, play down or dismiss the problems that have besieged it, which, among other organisational problems, hastened the resignation of the former commissioner. That is undoubtedly a wider problem that seems to be prevalent across the police force, with a culture of fear in "reporting your own". The learning report touches on that:

"A reason for not reporting such behaviour was a lack of confidence that it would be dealt with effectively and fear of repercussions."

Yesterday, thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), I met the families of murder victims of domestic abuse. What was clear

[Paula Barker]

from meeting those family members is that we have such a long way to go to ensure that women are treated fairly and that their voices are heard. Yesterday, I mentioned recent documentaries about the victims of the Yorkshire ripper and how the police at the time reported on victims in terms of innocent versus guilty, as if any woman could be guilty and should be murdered by a random stranger. That is absolutely appalling.

When a serving police officer can claim to smack his partner, as the hon. Member for Richmond Park mentioned, and then joke with a colleague that such a grotesque act

“makes them love you more”,

we have real problems. Police officers deal with domestic abuse and violence against women and girls almost daily. Given that in this country we are meant to police by consent, how on earth can women have faith in those with the power to protect them if they hold views such as those exposed by Operation Hotton as widespread and if, even worse, those views are not taken seriously by the leadership of the Metropolitan police? What a sorry state of affairs.

On International Women’s Day, I sincerely hope the Minister will wholeheartedly commit without delay to hold the Metropolitan police accountable for getting rid of the stain of misogyny that is ingrained in its fabric. Today and every day we owe that to women everywhere.

9.52 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate, Mrs Cummins, and I associate myself with hon. Members who are present to support the debate on International Women’s Day. The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) was right that such behaviour is, unfortunately, not specific to the Met but is found across the United Kingdom. As I often do, I will give a wee flavour of an aspect of it from back home in Northern Ireland.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) on introducing the debate. I also thank her for the opportunity to make a contribution. I support all the right hon. and hon. Members, colleagues and friends who are here.

At the outset, it is important to give context to the debate’s title. My thoughts are with the family of Sarah Everard, who still mourn her terrible loss and all the things that happened at that time. Nobody was unmoved by the awfulness of it, by how it happened and that it should be a police officer who carried out that most horrific and terrible crime. My lasting memory is of the photograph where she was stopped in the street by him and had no reason to believe there was any threat, as he was a police officer. Unfortunately, the circumstances proved that wrong. Today’s debate is about trying to stop that.

As a father and grandfather, I pause to question whether I have instilled in my sons respect for women as equals, and whether I have set a good example. The answer is that I truly hope I have. I am particularly proud of my boys. My wife deserves full gratitude for that because she reared them and instilled in them a respect for others.

The second question is not so easy. Can the society that we live in and in which my granddaughters are growing up treat them appropriately and give them adequate opportunity and protection? While I hope that that is the case, I am not so sure that it is. The contributions from the hon. Member for Richmond Park, the right hon. Member for Basingstoke and the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker), along with those who will contribute, illustrate that very well.

It is my hope that the debate will continue to initiate a change of mindset in individuals, in society and in how we respond. Undoubtedly, there is work to be done across every spectrum of society and we must all ask ourselves, are we are doing enough? Is society doing enough? I ask the Minister, kindly and respectfully, are Government doing enough? Are we making the changes? Are we instilling the right mindset in our young men and women? Without doubt, this is a mammoth step and we have no option but to start the journey for my granddaughters, for the loved ones of those who are here today and for those watching the debate online, who have the same mindset as we have to make society a better place.

I am unable to comment specifically on the Met. Others have done so with much more knowledge and insight, have done so incredibly well and have illustrated the need for change. I can say, however, that that police service is not alone, as the right hon. Member for Basingstoke mentioned earlier. I was somewhat disheartened—indeed, I was incredibly annoyed—to read an article in the *Belfast Telegraph* back home, which indicates that the problem is not limited to the Met. Indeed, the Police Service of Northern Ireland is taking active steps to address it as well.

There is, at last, an understanding or a realisation of what is taking place, how we change that and how society can do better. It was reported in the *Belfast Telegraph* that:

“During a meeting of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, it emerged that 19 officers are suspended from duties over sexual misconduct claims. A total of 25 incidents are being investigated, including some that happened while officers were on duty.”

I would suggest that when someone is called to the high office of being a police officer, there is an expectation that standards will be of the highest quality. Quite clearly, for some, that was not the case:

“The BBC reported that Deputy Chief Constable Mark Hamilton has called the situation ‘very uncomfortable’.”

That is a gross understatement.

“A total of 15 suspensions have taken place in the last 12 month, which is three times that of the year before.”

If that is not difficult reading, it should be. If numbers are up three times what they were the year before, we need to do something drastic about the attitude and the response.

I commend the PSNI for its decision to undertake the work to eradicate inappropriate behaviour before it becomes the norm. I understand that that is an uncomfortable process for some; not only for the men in the force, but for the women. It is clear, however, that what should not need to be spoken to grown adults about how they treat people must be spoken, because some do not seem to have grasped their inappropriate and sometimes criminal behaviour. It is a reminder that

although we might think that things are common sense, as they are for me, for everyone in this room and for 99.9% of those outside this room, and although we might think that a sense of humour means that anything can be said, but it cannot, it should not and it never should be. Some people need to think about that and be aware of the spoken word.

There is work to be done in every aspect of society, from training our children in the home and in school right through to working life. The case of Sarah Everard has shocked us to the core. It has numbed us, but I believe it has reinforced our realisation that something clearly must be done. The raft of complaints that followed show that it is not isolated. Indeed, some might say misogyny is endemic, which greatly worries me. As the PSNI has said, uncomfortable work must take place, and I believe that now is the time to put the money where the mouth is and to undertake that work urgently in every police force in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We need to change the unhealthy conduct of a small group of people in the Met and other police forces across the country.

I am pleased to play a small part with my contribution, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park on securing the debate. I very much look forward to what others have to say, and I particularly look forward to hearing from the Minister, who I know grasps the issue with a strong hand. She will be able to give us the encouragement that we need and tell us that things will change for the better, which is what I want to see. I think it is what we all want, and our constituents out there want the same thing.

10.1 am

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Cummins. I, too, pay tribute to the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) for securing this important and timely debate. I am proud, like her, to have been elected as one of the strong and formidable, but small, team of the 2019 Labour intake. Out of 26 Members, 20 of us are female. It is good that our two newest Members, taking our number to 28, are also female: my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) and our newest colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton). That shows that Labour is committed to ensuring that women's representation stays at the forefront, so that we can address the issues that we know women continue to face.

Last Thursday, I attended a service of prayer and reflection for the memory of Sarah Everard at Holy Trinity Clapham in my constituency. The 3rd of March marked a year since Sarah was horrifically kidnapped, raped and murdered by a serving Metropolitan police officer. As the hon. Member for Richmond Park highlighted, Sarah was just walking home to Brixton Hill from her friend's house near Clapham Common when she was kidnapped by the officer. As the MP for nearby Vauxhall, which includes part of Clapham Common, as the ex-councillor for Brixton Hill ward, and as a lifelong Brixton resident, the streets that Sarah walked are familiar to me and many of my constituents. I know the horrific feeling of insecurity that so many women still feel to this day. Since being elected to the House, I have walked those streets with my key in my

hand because of that feeling of unsafety. It is sad that as I referred to my fantastic group of female MPs who were elected with me, I know that they have faced many threats of misogyny and violence directed at them—violence that is directed at women and girls up and down this country.

Sarah's murder was certainly not the only incident of misogyny in the police. In June 2020, Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman were stabbed to death in Fryent country park, and the police officers responded by taking pictures and sharing them on WhatsApp. How could they even think that was an acceptable response? What would make someone bring out their phone, open WhatsApp and take pictures?

We have also heard of horrific messages between officers at Charing Cross police station, who casually joked about rape and domestic abuse. Too often we hear of misogynistic incidents, with police officers' behaviour leading them to be described as "bad apples", but we continue to see the flagrant disregard for women who have been murdered and the betrayal of women's rights, and we see officers at entire police stations engaging in the most distressful and distasteful messages. Despite the evidence of rampant misogyny, we see an officer continue to be deployed, even to this House. We cannot conclude anything other than there is a deep cultural problem of misogyny in the Met police. Sadly, rather than stepping up to the challenge and looking at how to address and tackle it, the Met police's response to such incidents has been to deepen the problem and say that the scale of the issue is small.

In response to the anger following Sarah Everard's death, including the anger felt by so many of my constituents in Vauxhall who wanted to go out and support that vigil, we saw the police take a different approach. We saw the police be heavy-handed with those who came out for the vigil. In response to women rightly demanding safety on the street, the Met police responded by saying that they should flag down a bus, or call 999 if confronted by an officer they did not trust. A number of those women have confronted the police, and that is where the issue lies. Sadly, many of my Vauxhall constituents have raised problems, including the initial lack of response by the police in my borough when they raise issues of sexual assault and domestic abuse. Thankfully, my local borough commander and the BCU are responding to that.

The London rape review published in December 2021 found that 65% of rape victims dropped out of the process, because they do not trust it and are fed up—that is 65% of those who actually came forward to report the rape in the first instance. The Met police must stop the culture of expecting potential victims to pick up the slack of behavioural changes in response to that horrific incident of misogyny. We continue to raise the bar for women to engage in a society where safety seems so little and the efforts to tackle it seem low priority.

Across London, we are served by fantastic female MPs from all political parties, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who has served in this House since 1987. I hope that the Minister will work with that group of female MPs across London to look at how we can address the issue in the Met police. The arrival of a new Metropolitan Police Commissioner provides us with an opportunity for a sea change in how we combat

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

institutionalised misogyny. I hope that the Minister will work with us, with female victims and with people leading the response to ensure that someone is appointed who is up to the job.

10.7 am

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Cummins.

I thank the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) for securing this important debate, in particular on International Women's Day. It might seem odd at first for a Nottingham MP to be speaking in a debate about a police force in another city, but the Metropolitan police's power and impact go much further than just London. In fact, the Met's actions have been incredibly damaging to women in my city.

In 2003, an undercover Met officer, Mark Kennedy, was sent to spy on climate activists in Nottingham. He posed as a fellow activist at the Sumac Centre in my constituency, where he deceived one woman, Kate Wilson, into a relationship that lasted almost two years. He went on to deceive other women into sexual relationships until he was exposed by activists in 2010. He was far from alone: more than 20 undercover Met officers are known to have had sexual relationships, some with the knowledge of more senior police officers. At least three fathered children with women they had met undercover. After a 10-year legal battle brought courageously by Kate Wilson, the courts ruled that the Met's failure to prevent undercover officers entering into sexual relationships amounted to sex discrimination and breached human rights.

Such misogyny is not confined to undercover policing. In 2013, 10 years later, my constituent, Dr Koshika Duff, was arrested for trying to give legal advice to a 15-year-old who was being stop and searched. She was violently strip-searched, while police made derogatory and misogynistic comments about her. They have since been forced to apologise and to pay financial compensation, but it is not yet known whether the officers will face disciplinary action.

I have spoken here about just two examples connected to my constituency, but countless more could be raised. A total of 594 complaints against Met employees for sexual misconduct were made between 2012 and 2018. A recent IOPC report found a shocking culture of misogyny among police officers at Charing Cross station. Again, that is not confined only to the Met. Sue Fish, the former chief constable of Nottinghamshire, agreed that

"it's not just the odd deviant...what was expressed in those messages in Charing Cross could be in any police station."

Indeed, the IOPC concluded:

"We believe these incidents are not isolated or simply the behaviour of a few 'bad apples'."

Mrs Miller: The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that the procedure within the police, including the Met police, of using anonymity to cover up the identity of people at the end of employment tribunals has to be stopped?

Nadia Whittome: I thank the right hon. Lady for her intervention. I wholly agree with her.

We must never forget that it was a serving Metropolitan police officer who kidnapped, raped and murdered Sarah Everard almost exactly a year ago. It was his fellow Met police officers who used appalling, disproportionate force against women who were gathering on Clapham Common to mourn her death. There were appalling acts of institutional misogyny in the case of Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman, and there have been many others. For over a year, I have been calling for an independent statutory inquiry into misogyny in the Met police. I hope the Minister will commit to that today.

We should be limiting the powers of the police, not handing them ever wider ones to be used at their discretion, as the Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Act 2021 has done and as the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill proposes. We need to limit the power to stop and search, particularly the ability to strip-search, which is invasive and humiliating and puts women in a vulnerable position.

We must ensure that women who are at particularly high risk of abuse and exploitation by police officers or others are not needlessly criminalised, such as those with addiction issues and those who are homeless or undocumented migrants. Where there are other services that might more appropriately support vulnerable people of all genders, such as victims of domestic and sexual violence or those experiencing mental ill health, those services should be used instead of, or alongside, the police. None of those measures is foolproof, but they aim to reduce the opportunity for police officers to abuse their power and, as the debate has clearly shown, they are badly needed.

10.12 am

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) on obtaining this debate. It is appropriate that we are having it on International Women's Day.

Sadly, concerns about the level and extent of sexism and misogyny in the Metropolitan police are not new. The culture of the Metropolitan police and how they interact with the public has been of concern for many decades. I want to stress that saying that misogyny is endemic in the Metropolitan police force—as I believe it is—is not the same as saying that every single Metropolitan police officer is a misogynist. However, misogyny is too deeply embedded in the Metropolitan police force to ignore. There are too many examples of institutional racism, misogyny and homophobia for the force to be excused, as it very often is, as just having a few bad apples.

It was interesting to read an interview with Deputy Chief Constable Maggie Blyth, who is now the national lead for violence against women and girls for the National Police Chiefs Council. She said that this idea that it is a "few bad apples" is wrong and that policing, like other jobs with access to power, could attract people who wanted to

"use their power in a corrupt and criminal way."

She added:

"There will be some attracted into working in policing, because of the powers that it offers them, the powers to exert and coerce other people, particularly vulnerable individuals. I think we shouldn't be naive to that".

We saw the spectacle of the now-departed Metropolitan Police Commissioner Cressida Dick, who seemed to have difficulty in admitting that there was any problem at all, let alone to be willing to do anything about it. In response to her resignation, Ken Marsh declared he had no confidence in the London Mayor, but presumably he has every confidence in himself and his members. That comes despite the tally of awful incidents, which other Members have touched on. That includes, but is not confined to, the terrible death of Sarah Everard, the brutal treatment of the women who attended the vigil in her honour, and the culture that was revealed among police colleagues of Wayne Couzens, who raped and murdered her.

There are, of course, Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman, whose deaths were not initially investigated sufficiently by the Metropolitan Police Service, as their mother would argue. To add insult to injury, two police officers tasked with guarding their bodies took photographs of themselves with the bodies and shared them online among their colleagues.

Then there is the scandal of the culture at Charing Cross police station, which colleagues have touched on, and the treatment of one of my constituents at Stoke Newington police station, although I understand that she is also a Nottingham resident. The IOPC said that the Charing Cross report illustrates an ugly truth. Much of the investigation concerned messages passed between police officers on social media. The messages include:

“You ever slapped your missus? Makes them love you more.”

“I would happily rape you.”

“Getting a woman into bed is like spreading butter. It can be done with a bit of effort using a credit card, but it’s quicker and easier just to use a knife.”

It is worth noting that the messages were not just grossly sexist; they were often racist. They spoke about “Somalian rats” and Muslim “fanatics”; there were references to Auschwitz; and the word “gay” was used as an insult. Those findings are bad enough, but the scale of bigotry will never be known because the police officers who were being investigated deliberately deleted material relevant to the investigation.

In my constituency, the Metropolitan police had to apologise and pay compensation to a completely innocent woman, Dr Konstancja Duff, whom they arrested and strip-searched. As Members have heard, she was only trying to help a 15-year-old child with a Know Your Rights card. It is worth hearing how Dr Duff described her experience:

“I was pinned to the floor of a cell by three female officers. I had my hands cuffed behind my back and my legs tied together while they cut off my clothes with scissors. They ripped out my earrings, grabbed my breasts roughly while turning me over, and even touched me between my legs, apparently looking for genital piercings”

—remember, this is a completely innocent woman. She continued:

“During the search, I could hear them talking with male officers who were standing by the open door.”

Their derogatory comments included,

“Treat her like a terrorist, I don’t care”

and

“What’s that smell? Oh, it’s her knickers”.

All of that was caught on CCTV. It took Dr Duff nine years to get justice, and she is an educated and relatively confident woman. How many other women are subjected to Metropolitan police sexism who do not have the

confidence to pursue a civil claim? How can a police force that seems to be saturated in sexism identify and stop the next PC Couzens?

The IOPC said about Charing Cross police station:

“A culture developed that made it difficult to challenge oppressive comments and behaviour, and an environment that was hostile and felt unsafe for those who were the direct or indirect targets of the discrimination.”

Sadly, that has been the culture of too much of the Metropolitan police for too long. Change is long overdue. The new commissioner must be a reforming one and must not attempt to conduct business as usual or bring in merely cosmetic changes. The reform must be root and branch. Women—not just in London, but all over the country—depend on it.

10.19 am

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Cummins. I too congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) for securing this important debate on International Women’s Day. I want to start with a quick reflection on our meeting yesterday with some of the families of sisters, mothers and daughters who have been murdered at the hands of men. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) brought them to Parliament. What struck me was how many different errors had been made across the system in many of those murders. There was a woman who had a history of domestic abuse, but who had had two glasses of wine, so the man was tried for manslaughter not murder because there was an assumption that she was in some way responsible for what happened to her. There was also somebody who was pushed out of a high block of flats and killed, but the man has not been charged, even though, again, there was a history of domestic abuse, because the assumption was that she may have had some drugs and it was all her own fault.

What strikes me about today’s debate is that when we talk about misogyny and sexual harassment in the police force, it affects not just those who were affected immediately by that incident, but the way we do policing across the board. There are so many cases where assumptions have been made about women because of ingrained misogyny and sexism and where that has led to them being murdered by their partners, when those partners should have been locked up years before. People are getting away with murder when they should be locked up, because of how the police are thinking about things and approaching their investigations. This is therefore an incredibly important debate.

We have seen a series of issues in the Met police over the last year, which sadly do not just touch on misogyny but go wider. Obviously, we had the events of last year and the horrific murder of Sarah, and others have spoken of what happened in the case of Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman. We have had the Daniel Morgan inquiry, which suggested institutional corruption in the Metropolitan police, and the Stephen Port inquiry, which, although inconclusive, certainly showed unconscious bias against people who are gay, and where assumptions were again made about their deaths. There are clearly cultural problems in the force.

Others have made the point that the problem goes beyond the Metropolitan police, and that is important because if we focus just on the Met, we miss problems

[Sarah Jones]

across the country. There have been instances of misogyny and sexual violence in other forces, such as West Mercia and Dorset. We have seen the inappropriate use of social media in Sussex, Hampshire, Leicestershire and Police Scotland, so these issues are not confined to the Met. There is also a wider problem of violence against women and girls, which hon. Members have touched on today, including the very low level of prosecutions for rape and the number of women who just walk away from the system because they cannot cope with the delays and problems we have seen.

I want to focus on some of the solutions, and a lot of them come from Operation Hotton, which we have talked about. What is interesting is not just how it identified bullying, aggressive behaviour, discrimination, toxic masculinity and the banter used to excuse offensive behaviour, but its focus on the way the force was structured, which enabled that misogyny to occur. It focused on the nature of the work—the shift patterns, the isolation and this business of people acting up in an unofficial capacity, so that behaviours were completely unchallenged, which is key to some of the reforms we need to see.

We also heard of demeaning and intimidating actions towards police officers on probation, such as beckoning them with a bell or threatening to cut their hair or take their belongings; officers being shouted at; and women being sexually harassed or treated as the “weary female” when they raise issues. These things are all to do with leadership and management within the force, as well as the misogyny. I know we are talking about misogyny and sexual harassment, but the report also showed horrific racism and homophobia. It was the culture that enabled horrific behaviour across the board, and that is what we need to look at.

My questions for the Minister are therefore around what is going to be done about this. I think that everybody here thinks that something needs to be done. The Government have set up a couple of inquiries, which I am sure the Minister will talk about, but we need to go further and faster, and act more. With policing issues, the Home Office sometimes has a tendency to say, “This is a terrible thing and must not happen,” but it has a key role in leading a change in approach from the top, to make sure that these things do not continue.

We need to look at how we vet police officers. The 250-page document on how we vet them shows that they are vetted for their propensity to be blackmailed: do they have problems with their finances, or problems that would allow them to be blackmailed? The vetting is not good enough on who they are, what they have said on social media over the last five years, what they think and whether they should be with vulnerable people. Our vetting needs to be looked at.

Police training needs to be overhauled. Officers need ongoing training throughout their careers, including on anti-racism and on tackling violence against women and girls. When officers are first trained, they are not specifically trained on violence against women and girls, and we think they should be. We also need to end the inappropriate use of social media, which has come up time and again in all the incidents in the Met. The Government should look at taking action against those private WhatsApp messages.

We have the Dame Angiolini inquiry. The Labour party has called for it to be on a statutory footing, so that it has the powers it needs to go everywhere it needs to go. I ask the Minister to look at that.

Ms Abbott: Does my hon. Friend agree that it should be clearer to serving police officers that engaging in misogynistic or racist behaviour will be a bar to recruitment? Of the officers involved in the Charing Cross scandal, two have already been promoted.

Sarah Jones: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I have talked to the police about that issue and about whether misconduct proceedings, which I was about to come to, need to be improved.

Swift action needs to be taken. When there is misconduct, there are quite a lot of delays in the process. We need to make sure that there are clear management processes to stop misconduct being seen as “banter”. If someone is misogynistic—if it is clear from their social media what their views are—they have no place in the police. We hold our police to higher standards than other professions—quite rightly. That is what the police want; they want to be held to those standards, because they want policing by consent. They need the public to trust them, and that is what they would call for, too. We also need to look at whistleblowing procedures. I have spoken to police officers who say, “We have quite a good whistleblowing procedure, because some people come forward.” Actually, it is not working as it should, and we need to look at it again.

There are wider issues that would help the culture of the police, such as having specialist rape and sexual assault units in each police force, so that the force is more expert. We need to look at the number of women in policing. Only a third of Metropolitan police officers are women, and that changes the culture. As we know, and as hon. Members have said today, having more women in Parliament means that we have better debates, better policy making and better laws. In the same way, the Metropolitan police and other police forces would be better with more women.

There are many other issues we could talk about. My main point is that there are a series of practical actions that need to be taken—not just in the Met, but beyond—and it is the Government’s role to look at those. I thank all the women who have contributed, and our honourable male contributor, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I am honoured to be in a room of very powerful women whom I admire hugely and who have all made, in their own ways, excellent contributions today. They reflect how the House of Commons is shifting towards more powerful women and a better conversation. We need to make sure that the Metropolitan police and the wider police force do the same.

10.30 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Rachel Maclean): Thank you for calling me, Mrs Cummins. For one of the first times in this Chamber, I start by putting on record my agreement with virtually everything that has been said by every Member present. We have so much more in common on the issues referred to by hon. Members from all sides. I thank the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) for her remarks; on International Women’s Day,

we need a joint approach for this shocking and horrific topic. I also thank the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) for securing the debate on this vital topic.

The police perform a unique and critical role in our society. A number of Members referred to the police officers in their constituencies and their local forces. I join them in paying tribute to those women senior leaders who have an incredibly difficult job to do under intense public scrutiny. My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) referenced Maggie Blyth and other officers. I work very closely with Maggie Blyth, who is a Hampshire officer, and many others across the force; she is responsible for working closely with her fellow officers on a number of the issues that have been referenced.

I agree with what Members said about the recruitment of female officers. Driving more officers and encouraging more women to come forward is a big step for women to join the police, because of the many issues they will be aware of not only in the Met police but forces around the country. I thank those women who have come forward.

The police uplift funding programme, delivered by the Home Office, has a record all-time high of serving female officers. However, the number is still way too low at only 34%—I think we all agree on that. Although it is at an all-time high, we need to keep doing more. Some 42% of the officers recruited since 2021 through the uplift programme are female, and I thank them all for coming forward. I think we all agree that diversity—whether of gender or race, as Members have referenced—is vital. A lot of the work on the uplift programme is to secure that diversity, and we need to keep on with that important work.

I assure all colleagues that the Home Office is determined to use every measure at its disposal to tackle the issues that have been raised and to restore public confidence in policing. Today we focused on the Met, which is the UK's largest police force. It plays a unique role in our policing system and, for that reason, attracts a huge amount of public attention. In a sense, it informs the public discourse around policing: the cases that occur within the Met police and in our capital attract a lot of attention. That has a bearing on how British policing is viewed more widely.

I will not shrink from saying that the appalling behaviour Members mentioned has no place in our society and in our policing, let alone in an institution in which we vest so much trust to protect us as women and uphold those highest standards. Members referred to their experiences of walking through the streets in their constituencies, across London and anywhere in our country. As a woman I have those same experiences and so does my daughter. I want things to change for my three-month-old granddaughter. That is why it is a privilege to be doing this job today.

We will not shy away from taking action. I will set out some of the actions we are taking and will continue to do to tackle these appalling issues. We work closely not only with the Met police and the commissioner—whoever the new commissioner will be—but the Mayor of London, who is the police and crime commissioner for the capital. The Mayor has significant influence and powers, and tools at his disposal vested in him by the police and crime settlement.

Ms Abbott: Does the Minister agree that in the recent past it has been very challenging for women to join the police force? I was very struck by a senior female police officer who told me that when she joined, not so long ago, part of the initiation ritual for new woman police officers was to drop their skirt and have another police officer stamp on their bottom the date on which they joined the police force. That culture is not so long in the past.

Rachel Maclean: We all share horror at that and the other incidents referenced by the hon. Member for Richmond Park. That is why we are taking the steps I am about to set out. We must remember that during the coronavirus pandemic in particular the police faced an unenviable task, which for the most part they approached with skill and professionalism. I know that from conversations with my local force in Redditch and I want to pay tribute to them as well. They had to help to enforce the rules the Government introduced with one crucial objective in mind: to save lives.

Members referenced the report published last month by the IOPC, which looked into the bullying and discrimination in Charing Cross police station. Those findings were shocking. The report described behaviour that is unacceptable and depicted an environment where such conduct was commonplace amid what can only be described as a toxic culture where leadership was sorely lacking. Policing and the Met must do better, and we are absolutely committed to raising the bar.

As the public would expect, when officers are found to have committed gross misconduct and are dismissed, they cannot re-join policing. We are also ensuring that initial police recruitment vetting practices carried out in each force, to which the hon. Member for Croydon Central referred, are rigorous. The assessment process addresses a candidate's suitability for the role of police officer, including testing against core behaviours and values. When officers move force, they are re-vetted.

Members rightly pointed to problems with those processes, so I will talk about what the Government and the Met are doing. Restoring confidence is not just about how individuals are disciplined and vetted. It is also about making sure the kind of culture flagged up in the report is not allowed to take root. It is about ensuring those rotten elements in policing are rooted out and removed. We are taking action to address the issues we established the Angiolini inquiry, which started on 31 January. Obviously, Dame Elish has focused on the particular case of Sarah Everard's killer, but she will consider whether the culture and places where he worked meant that alarm bells did not ring earlier. She will present the findings of that phase of the review to the Home Secretary later this year. In the second phase of the inquiry, we expect a light to be shone on wider issues across policing, including workplace cultures.

In October 2021, the MPS announced that it had commissioned Baroness Louise Casey of Blackstock to lead an independent and far-reaching review into standards of behaviour. She will also assess the extent to which the force's current leadership, recruitment, vetting, training, communications and other practices effectively reinforce the standards the public so rightly expect.

Further, the Home Secretary has requested that Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services—HMICFRS—inspects forces across

[*Rachel Maclean*]

England and Wales to judge their vetting in counter-corruption capabilities. We specifically asked the body to look at how forces identify and deal with misogyny and sexism in the workplace. We are working closely with the National Police Chiefs' Council to ensure professional standards in social media use for police officers—another important issue.

Paula Barker: On the point about social media, how will that be addressed for accounts which are anonymous or under another name?

Rachel Maclean: That is a very important point and the work will look at that. A lot of work is also taking place on the Online Safety Bill on the wider issues of anonymity which are used against women and girls. The hon. Lady is right to point to that.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke mentioned transparency and disciplinary processes. She is right to highlight that because it is another essential element. That is why this Government introduced the system whereby those disciplinary hearings are now public—a new initiative in 2015—and why the police barred list is searchable by the public. My hon. Friend the Policing Minister wrote to chiefs and hearing chairs recently to remind them that hearings should be held in public where possible.

Mrs Miller: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for giving way and for the excellent speech she is giving. In the case I raised, it was made unclear that the name of the officer who had been subject to a tribunal could be used publicly; indeed, it took my local newspaper going to court to get the matter clarified. That cannot be right. Why the confusion?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my right hon. Friend for pressing me on that matter. Again, I will just add to my comments that where possible we expect those hearings to be held in public. And let the message go out from this Chamber that we expect transparency from the police in dealing with these issues.

We all hold it to our hearts that it is unacceptable that women and girls continue to face fear, violence and abuse. Crimes such as domestic abuse, rape, stalking and so-called honour-based abuse and harassment are far too common. That is why we published our Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls strategy last July—to drive a step change in our response.

Regarding the work we are doing, a number of structures, led by the Home Secretary and a number of Ministers across Government, are involved in driving the work of those structures. We have discussed that work on multiple occasions with Members who are here today and with others, and I think we will discuss it again this afternoon.

In the time that I have left, I will just highlight some of the work we are doing, because this is a landmark moment and we have stepped up to act in response to it. We appointed Maggie Blyth immediately to ensure there is co-ordinated action nationally across the police forces, and we amended the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill to make it clear that the serious violence duty can include domestic abuse and sexual offences.

Last week we launched Enough., a national communications campaign. It is a multi-million-pound and multi-year campaign in response to the calls of campaigners—both in Parliament and outside Parliament, on the front line—to say that we have to tackle this issue at source and that we have to make it clear that it is not okay; we have had enough of being harassed on the streets. We want to take the onus away from it being on the woman or girl to call harassment out and stop it from happening in the first place. That is why we are driving this campaign and investing significant amounts of cash in it. Many Members were at the launch event for Enough. and they welcomed the campaign. It has also been widely applauded by campaigners across the country.

We have spent significant amounts of money on various schemes, investing in measures to keep women safe at night in the night-time economy, on public transport and in public spaces—issues we have discussed many times in Westminster Hall. We have also awarded significant funding to police and crime commissioners across the country for programmes to tackle perpetrators of domestic abuse and stalking.

The major point that I will take a moment to reflect on—again, this was called for by many Opposition MPs and campaigners—is that we put violence against women and girls on a par with national threats to the country, such as homicide, serious organised crime, terrorism and child sex abuse. That is why we made the announcement just last week that we will add violence against women and girls to the strategic policing requirement. That sends a clear and unequivocal message that these crimes must be a priority for forces and must be taken seriously, and that the full effort and resources of the police—indeed, the whole criminal justice system—must respond in an appropriate fashion.

There is a lot more that we are doing in this space.

Sarah Jones: I thank the Minister for giving way. I just wanted to draw to her attention a major report that is being published this morning by Sir Michael Barber and the Policing Foundation, which is considering police reform. I know that the Minister has listed actions she is taking in relation to violence against women and girls, but in terms of police reform Sir Michael Barber and the Police Foundation are suggesting that police officers should have a licence to practise that is renewed every five years, and that if someone is not good enough they cannot remain in the police. I am not suggesting that that is anybody's policy yet, but there are some interesting structural reforms that the report's authors are considering. It has taken them two years to do this big piece of work. It is really excellent and it will contain some sensible things that perhaps the Minister could look at.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Lady for bringing that to my attention. I have a lot of respect for Sir Michael Barber and the work he is doing, and of course I will take time to study the report. If there are sensible proposals in it we will look at them, because we all want the police to fix these issues. We cannot go on with the situation in this country where the police force does not command the respect or the trust of over half the population. Nowhere is it more appropriate for me to say that than here, in this place, on International Women's Day, with a passionate group of female and male MPs, although the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has left the Chamber.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I am still here.

Rachel Maclean: Of course, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) is still here. I know that all our male colleagues support this, and so do our partners, husbands, sons, brothers and fathers. We are all united in the fight.

I want to spend a couple of moments to talk about education, which is vital and was referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke. From September 2020, relationships, sex and health education became statutory in schools. In primary schools, age-appropriate relationships education involves supporting children to learn about what healthy relationships are and their importance. It is important that we talk to our young people and children sensitively and carefully about the fraught issues of consent, in a world where they are all navigating the online space.

The Government are doing huge amounts of work through the draft Online Safety Bill to provide wider protections that will help our young people to use the internet safely and protect children from all sorts of violent threat, but such education has to start in our schools. That is why I work closely with my colleague at the Department for Education, the Minister for School Standards, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), to ensure that that education is rolled out.

To update colleagues about what issues are covered, young children will be learning factual knowledge on sex, sexual health, sexuality, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, developing intimate relationships and resisting pressure to have sex. We want young people to learn what a positive healthy relationship looks like and how to keep themselves safe in a variety of situations. We will be teaching and talking to children, in a sensitive and age-appropriate way, about what consent is and is not; the definition and recognition of rape, sexual assault and harassment; and the concepts of abuse, grooming, coercion and domestic abuse, in all its forms. We all know that one of the problems with domestic abuse is the difficulty that victims and survivors have in recognising what they are going through, especially when it comes to economic abuse and issues of coercive and controlling behaviour.

Mrs Miller: The Minister is being generous with her time. There was some resistance when the Government put forward relationship education for five-year-olds. Does she agree with me that the events we have been debating today, and many other forms of misogyny and sexual harassment, underline how right the Government were to ensure that relationship education starts immediately when children start school at the age of five?

Rachel Maclean: I completely agree. Parents and families have a vital role, but not every five-year-old is fortunate enough to grow up in a family with caring parents. As the Minister at the Home Office responsible for safeguarding, I have seen some appalling, shocking and heartbreaking cases of what can happen to our youngest children unless we take sensitive and age-appropriate steps to help and support them to grow up in a safe way.

Yesterday afternoon, I met victims of violence and domestic abuse at a wonderful reception organised by Women's Aid. Some inspirational people stood up and

talked about how they had not recognised that what they were going through was domestic abuse. One of them was Mel B, one of the Spice Girls. She said she could go on stage at Wembley Stadium in front of hundreds of thousands of people and sing, dance and perform, yet she found it much harder to talk about her own abuse. Sometimes it hits home when people see the impact of domestic abuse on someone who lives in the glare of celebrity. We must never forget the work that is being done on such issues and the work that we are all doing together to help victims of domestic abuse.

I thank all hon. Members here, and I especially thank the hon. Member for Richmond Park for securing the debate. I am grateful for the opportunity to underscore just how seriously we take these issues and to outline all the work we are doing, remembering, as always, that there is more to do.

It is important to remember that there are thousands of men and women who wear the police uniform with pride and professionalism, helping us all on a daily basis. I think we have all made that clear in our remarks. Serving as a police officer is an honour, but when that honour is abused, the ramifications are significant and far-reaching. Public confidence is fundamental to our model of policing by consent. That is why it is incumbent on the Met, and policing as a whole, to root out and eliminate behaviour that risks undermining public confidence and trust.

10.50 am

Sarah Olney: Thank you very much for chairing our proceedings, Mrs Cummins. This has been a really excellent and thought-provoking debate, and I am incredibly grateful to everybody for their contributions. A few things struck me, and I just want to touch on them. The hon. Members for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker) and for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) both highlighted the issue of undermining public confidence in the police. We heard particularly from the hon. Member for Vauxhall about the number of rape victims who are dropping out of the process because they do not trust the police. For me, that really sums up what the issue is, or how the issue manifests itself.

Another thing that really struck me was when the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome) and the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) talked about their constituents who have had to go out and fight for justice themselves. The hon. Member for Nottingham East talked about the case in relation to protesters and undercover police officers. That took 10 years to come to justice. There was also the case of Dr Konstancja Duff, so vividly described by the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington. That took nine years to come to justice. It really brings home to me the extent to which women have had to be responsible for their own safety and for getting justice for themselves because we have seen this wall of inertia, defensiveness or, potentially, something more sinister from the police. Those are the two points that really came home to me during this debate.

I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for the points she made and in particular what she said about mandatory relationships education in schools and how important it is that we tackle the scourge of misogyny in wider society, because it is not

[Sarah Olney]

found just in the police or in the Metropolitan police. We heard so many examples of police forces across the country, including the one in Northern Ireland, which was referred to by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I was really pleased to hear the Minister touch on that when she gave her response. She said that we are already seeing mandatory sex and relationships education in schools, and I think that that is really important. I just want to raise a tiny point. She talked about consent and resisting pressure to have sex. I would like to think that we are also teaching boys not to apply pressure. I am sure she is happy to clarify that.

I was really pleased with the response from the Minister. She spoke with great passion and great conviction, and that gives me quite a lot of optimism that this is genuinely an issue that is at the core of the Home Office's work. We have a female Minister here and a female Home Secretary. As I said in my opening remarks, I believe—I continue to believe—that having women at all levels of Government and politics is good for women and girls. I was really pleased with a lot of what the Minister said. In terms of where we are at, we seem to have quite a lot of reports coming out. She mentioned the Angiolini review. There is the Casey review. There is the Barber review. It is brilliant to see that this issue is being looked at seriously and that the problems are being identified. What we really want to see as we move forward is action and police forces across the country being held to account. We need to see measures and to see progress.

I want to touch on what the right hon. Member for Basingstoke said about transparency; I think I saw a tweet or a Twitter thread about the issue she mentioned. That is so important: these things should not happen behind closed doors. As she says, transparency is the best form of disinfectant.

I want to close by reiterating my thanks to everybody for taking part today, but I also want to pay tribute to the families of Sarah Everard and Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman. They are still suffering unimaginable grief at the loss of their daughters. It must be so much harder knowing that those cases are being used to highlight bigger issues and in particular that their deaths happened in such an appalling way, so I want to take a minute to pay tribute to them and to send my sympathies to them. I am conscious that talking about all those cases so often today may well have increased the families' distress, but it is so important that we do not allow these incidents to go unremarked and that we take every opportunity we can to see the step change we all need to see to ensure that this does not happen again. I put on record my gratitude to them and my respects to them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered reports of misogyny and sexual harassment in the Metropolitan Police.

10.54 am

Sitting suspended.

Paid Miscarriage Leave

11 am

Judith Cummins (in the Chair): I will call Angela Crawley to move the motion, and then I will call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention in 30-minute debates.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered paid miscarriage leave.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins, and I am grateful to the Speaker for allowing this debate to take place on International Women's Day. It seems appropriate that we have a woman in the Chair, and I hope we have many more. I am grateful to the Members in attendance, and to those who have pledged their support for a Backbench business debate in coming weeks.

I thank Ruth Bender-Atik from the Miscarriage Association, as well as the organisations Sands, Tommy's, Mumsnet and the civil service working group, as well as the many organisations that have provided briefings and endless advice. I also thank colleagues who have supported my many applications for debates on the matter, my early-day motions and my private Member's Bill on miscarriage leave. I thank the 39,000 members of the public who have signed the paid miscarriage leave petition on 38 Degrees, and who have been in touch with their MP and bravely shared their personal story.

One pregnancy in four ends in miscarriage. That is not to say that one woman in four will have a miscarriage; one pregnancy in four will result in baby loss. Miscarriage is often used as an umbrella term for a number of conditions. Miscarriage is the most common type of pregnancy loss, which is when a baby dies in utero during pregnancy. In the UK, miscarriage is defined as baby loss that occurs up to 23 weeks and six days into the pregnancy. The main causes of miscarriage are thought to be genetic, hormonal, infection, blood clotting problems and anatomical reasons, but it is important to say that there is never any logical reason for a miscarriage to occur. On most occasions, it is the most heartbreaking thing that can happen to a person, and no amount of rational reasoning will compensate for the loss that the person experiences.

The Miscarriage Association has highlighted that we should also consider ectopic and molar pregnancies, and it is important that they be included in this debate and considered when any policy changes are made on this issue. An ectopic pregnancy is a pregnancy that develops outside the womb, usually in one of the Fallopian tubes; it is one pregnancy in 80. It causes a dangerous situation whereby tubes may rupture, and it often requires immediate surgery.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member and to the way in which she is championing the issue, as well as to the passion with which she speaks. She talks about the number of pregnancies lost, which is a tragedy. For black and minority ethnic women, there is a 60% higher likelihood of losing a birth. Is that the same with miscarriage? The data does not seem quite as clear for BME women as it is on broader loss through stillbirth.

Angela Crawley: I thank the right hon. Member for asking her question. To be perfectly honest, I am not sure that statistics on the matter are adequately recorded, so I hope Departments will look at that.

Ectopic and molar pregnancy should come under the umbrella of miscarriage. We must consider molar pregnancy, which is a condition in which an abnormal fertilised egg implants in the womb, and the cells that should become the placenta grow far too quickly, taking up space where the embryo would normally develop. We must also consider baby losses following in vitro fertilisation treatment, and the awful experiences of recurrent miscarriage, which is faced by too many expecting parents.

The loss of a baby is a major source of grief that many parents will carry with them for the rest of their life. Even those closest to someone who has experienced baby loss might never know what they have been through. There is a stigma around the subject of miscarriage, and more must be done to open dialogue and allow women to discuss the issue openly in a comfortable way.

Members are likely to be aware of the received wisdom of not telling people of a pregnancy before 12 weeks. However, that often results in parents suffering alone and in silence. They may be fearful of disclosing to their employer that they are trying to conceive because they fear workplace discrimination. It can be difficult, embarrassing and sometimes impossible to speak to an employer about what has happened. That means that many people going through the legitimate grief of baby loss will not receive the support they require.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I echo the earlier comments about the hon. Lady's excellent campaigning on this issue. There has been much talk of creating a kinder society as we come out of the pandemic. When it comes to social reforms, what she is proposing today, as well as wider bereavement leave, is something that any progressive Government would consider.

Angela Crawley: Absolutely. I thank the hon. Gentleman for that comment, which brings me neatly to my next point.

Ahead of the Government's proposed employment Bill, the Taylor review has highlighted the changing demographics of the workplace. Many more women are in work than ever before. Women's participation in the workplace has been growing quicker than men's over the past 20 years.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this issue forward. One of my office staff has had multiple miscarriages. It has been a traumatic and difficult time for that lady, and I have seen the emotional and physical impact. Having to take holiday to try to get over the experience has added to that. Does the hon. Lady agree that the situation is unacceptable? We cannot legislate for compassion, but we can legislate for compassionate leave, which is what she is saying. That is why I support what she puts forward. I look forward very much to the Minister's response.

Angela Crawley: I am sorry to hear about the experience of the hon. Gentleman's member of staff. To experience miscarriage once is truly awful, but to experience it on multiple occasions can be truly devastating. It is not

sufficient to say that an employee should take sick or holiday leave when they have a miscarriage. It is a grief, not an illness. That person should be allowed the time to grieve, and that should be recognised.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech and does excellent work on this issue. I fully support her. *The Lancet's* recent series on miscarriage highlighted the huge and still widely underestimated mental health impact it has; those who experience miscarriage face a quadrupling of the risk of suicide. In the light of that, does she agree that flexible working should never be seen as an adequate alternative to statutory leave?

Angela Crawley: Absolutely; I thank the hon. Member for that point. Flexible leave was not designed to be a catch-all, taking the place of provisions lacking from legislation. Flexible leave absolutely has a place in workplaces—it allows parents to take time off when required, and workers to adapt their working situation and make it more flexible—but it is not designed for the circumstances we are talking about, and it does not reflect the needs of the employees we are talking about, who need far more support and wrap-around care on their return to work. It is not sufficient to say that flexible leave would cover that.

There is already a cost associated with absences of this nature. Current legislation does not give enough support to women and their partners who experience pregnancy loss in the workplace. I hope that the Minister can update us on what is being done in the employment Bill to ensure that women are helped into work and can continue to work, and to ensure workplace protections are in place to prevent pregnancy and maternity discrimination. The Bill should also recognise life events that many women face during their employment, such as fertility treatment; and the right to miscarriage leave should be in the Bill.

We must keep in mind, however, that it is not just women who are affected by baby loss; the grief is shared by the partners of those who are pregnant. As I have mentioned, miscarriage is defined in the UK as occurring before 24 weeks of pregnancy. After 24 weeks, baby loss is considered to be a stillbirth. I thank my hon. Friends the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), and for Glasgow East (David Linden), for their work on legislation that would entitle parents to two weeks of paid bereavement leave. At present, there is no provision for those who experience baby loss before 24 weeks. While the updated ACAS guidance recommends that employers still consider giving them time off—I am grateful to the Minister for hearing that—there is no legal right to paid leave, and no statutory requirement on employers to allow paid leave. Many companies, including Monzo, Lidl and ASOS, have created a workplace policy of offering miscarriage leave for up to seven or 10 days, which is welcome, but that does not happen across the board. I commend these companies for taking that step.

A dedicated workplace policy is just one of the many ways that employers can give meaningful support, and it is also further evidence that employers recognise the significance of such a life event. As companies do not consistently have such policies, however, the Government must do more to ensure that employers can support their employees.

[Angela Crawley]

Leaving miscarriage provision to the discretion of employers leads to inequality and can result in discrimination against parents in low-paid and part-time work. For many workers, the only option is to take time off through annual leave or sick leave—using holidays or flexi-leave—which is not sufficient. The statutory provisions are not adequate, because grief is neither a holiday nor an illness. A specific statutory provision for paid miscarriage leave should cover not only the women experiencing the miscarriage, but their partners. It would signal to those who experience baby loss that they have permission to grieve.

This is about more than changing policy. It is about changing workplace culture in the UK to account for real-life issues that affect the workforce. We should aim to support the workforce adequately, and we should adopt the recognised international best practice. Both New Zealand and Australia have recently introduced comprehensive policies on paid miscarriage leave. Only last month, the Northern Ireland Assembly legislated to introduce paid miscarriage leave following a public consultation, with the policy due to come into force no later than April 2026. Northern Ireland will be the first place—not only in the UK, but in Europe—to introduce such a policy in the public or private sector.

The Scottish Government have committed to provide three days' paid leave in the public sector following miscarriage, but they do not have the powers within employment law to extend that further. Therefore, it is up to the UK Government. The rest of the UK should not be left behind but should follow the lead of the devolved Governments and introduce statutory paid miscarriage leave across the UK. Will the Minister look closely at the plans, both internationally and domestically, and consider how paid miscarriage leave would positively impact on workers across the UK?

I wish to highlight the Miscarriage Association's pregnancy loss pledge, which encourages employers across the UK to commit to support their staff through the stress of miscarriage by meeting a set of basic standards. It encourages employers to create a supportive work environment where people feel able to discuss or disclose pregnancy without fear of disadvantage or discrimination; to be open about pregnancy-related leave rules, ensuring that staff feel able to take the time off that they need; to encourage empathy and understanding towards people and their partners experiencing pregnancy loss; to ensure that line managers have access to guidance on supporting those who have experienced pregnancy loss; to be flexible to those who are returning to work following pregnancy loss; and to implement a pregnancy loss policy or guidance for the workplace, ensuring that it includes affected partners.

Last week, I wrote to every local authority in Scotland, inviting them to sign up to the pledge. Many have already given a positive response, including Glasgow City, Moray, West Dunbartonshire and North Ayrshire Councils, all of which are giving serious consideration to the pledge. Fife Council has already committed to the pledge—the first local authority across the UK to do so—and commitments by large public sector employers represent a huge step forward in the right direction. I am certain that more will follow this example, and I encourage Members present to encourage their own

councils to make that pledge. If he has not already done so, I ask the Minister to consider signing the pledge on behalf of his Department and to encourage other Government Departments to follow. There is no doubt in my mind that the legislative change is necessary and essential to ensure that employers have meaningful leave policies in place for pregnancy loss.

Finally, I want to thank all the parents who have shared their stories of loss and grief. I thank Morgan's Wings and Emma from the Hopes & Dreams podcast for bravely turning their stories of grief into ones of comfort for so many other people. Pregnancy should be a time of celebration, expectation and joy, but when pregnancy loss occurs, it is not only about the loss of the pregnancy but about the hopes and dreams that expectant parents had for their little life. It can be incredibly difficult on expectant parents. The Government must do more to help those who experience miscarriage, with employers acknowledging the value of their workforce and introducing dedicated policies. However, without statutory provision or the legal right, many parents will not receive the support they require. The Government must lead and support those in work with the right to take paid leave and permission to take time off to grieve. I urge the Minister to give serious consideration to introducing paid miscarriage leave across the UK and to supporting my private Member's Bill on 18 March, which calls for this policy to be introduced in statute.

11.14 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for securing today's debate, and congratulate her on the power of work that she has done on this issue. Like many others, I support the private Member's Bill that she is trying to pilot through the House.

I had a difficult situation only last week when I met a constituent, Gillian McLellan. She and her husband, Christopher, unfortunately experienced the loss of their baby Daisy. Thursday past would have been Daisy's due date.

I have three brief points to make while I have the floor and we can discuss the wider issue of miscarriage and bereavement leave. First, there are many great charities out there. Baby Loss Retreat is one that has been doing stellar work to support Gillian and Christopher. I sometimes question why it falls to charities so often to provide support to people. That follows neatly to the issue of counselling.

I have looked at the issue across the UK. Not just in Scotland, but right across these islands there is clearly a postcode lottery when it comes to counselling for parents. I accept that during the pandemic some things were done by Zoom, but the lack of support for Gillian and many other families, particularly over the last couple of years, is something we will have to look at.

There is a wider and perhaps more sensitive issue around certification. I understand that we can get into a very difficult debate when it comes to issuing birth certificates. In Daisy's case that would have been at 17 weeks. That then leads, for example, to details not being recorded in NHS notes, which is particularly problematic if there is a follow-up pregnancy, so Ministers across these islands have to reflect on that.

The final point I want to make relates to the Employment Bill. I have always found the Minister to be incredibly thoughtful. He and I have had a lot of dialogue, particularly on neonatal leave and pay, but I really want to see the Employment Bill enacted as quickly as possible. This will be one of the biggest issues that our generation of MPs will legislate on. It strikes me that elements of the Employment Bill, no doubt as a result of Brexit, will be controversial, but I again issue a plea to the Minister that bereavement leave and neonatal leave and pay be decoupled from the Employment Bill. Some of the issues have such a high level of cross-party support in the House that we could pilot them through in a day, as we did last night with certain legislation.

So let us decouple some of the less controversial aspects of the Employment Bill and make sure that commendable as my hon. Friend's Bill is, she does not have to take it forward. We need the Government to come forward with a decoupled Bill that would tackle this and so many other issues on which there is vast cross-party agreement in this House.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) on securing today's important debate. This is a really important and sensitive issue, and I want to express my deep sympathy for anybody who has experienced the loss of a baby. Sometimes the most poignant debates in this place are when we talk about baby loss at any stage of pregnancy, or indeed after birth.

The hon. Member has spoken with candour and passion, and I am grateful to her not just for today's debate, but for our exchanges and the rest of the work that she has done, and for raising awareness of the significant impact of baby loss at any stage on parents. I also want to thank others who have contributed to this debate for their thoughtful and insightful comments, especially, as the hon. Lady rightly notes, on International Women's Day when we come together to showcase the issues that are so important not just for women, but for families and couples across this country and the world.

As a Government we understand that there is plenty more that needs to be done to support women's health. I will begin by first setting out the wider work that the Government are taking forward in relation to women's health, including in the workplace. In March 2021, we announced the establishment of England's first women's health strategy, which is being led by the Department of Health and Social Care. Health in the workplace and fertility, pregnancy, pregnancy loss and postnatal support will be priority areas within the women's health strategy.

We know that damaging taboos and stigmas remain around many areas of women's health. They can prevent women from starting conversations about their health or seeking support for a health issue. When women do speak about their health, all too often they are not listened to, but the Government are determined to tackle those issues. We want to ensure that women feel supported in the workplace, that taboos are broken down through open conversation, and that employers feel well equipped to support women in managing their health within the workplace. "Our Vision for the Women's

Health Strategy for England", published on 23 December 2021, sets out an ambitious and positive new agenda to improve the health and wellbeing of women across England. We will publish the full strategy later this year, but in the meantime I reiterate that the levelling up of women's health is an imperative for us all.

The Government have an active agenda on work and health more widely. One example is the Government's response to the "Health is everyone's business" consultation. The response sets out measures that will protect and maintain progress made in reducing ill health-related job loss, and will see 1 million more disabled people in work from 2017 to 2027. The measures include a national digital information and advice service to provide greater clarity around employer and employee rights and responsibilities, working with the Health and Safety Executive to develop a set of clear and simple principles for employers, and increasing access to occupational health. Those measures are key steps in our effort to change the workplace culture around health and sickness absence, which will benefit those who have lost a pregnancy.

The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East is specifically interested in a leave entitlement for miscarriage. In April 2020, we introduced parental bereavement leave and pay for employed parents who lose a child under the age of 18, or who suffer a stillbirth from 24 weeks of pregnancy. That new entitlement recognises that the death of a child or the stillbirth of a baby is particularly tragic. Although parental bereavement leave does not apply when a baby is lost before 24 completed weeks of pregnancy, there is support available. Women who are not able to return to work because of ill health following a miscarriage may be entitled, for example, to statutory sick pay or annual leave, and their entitlements need to be looked at in the round with the wider benefits system.

Parental bereavement leave and pay is a statutory minimum, and in introducing that entitlement the Government sent an important message to employers that staff members who have suffered a bereavement should be supported. Indeed, I am pleased to say that there are many good examples of businesses that offer compassionate leave for their employees following a miscarriage. The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East talked about ASOS as one of those examples. I have spoken to ASOS. What it offers is not miscarriage leave per se; as she rightly described, it covers "life events". ASOS is particularly forward looking in understanding that miscarriage is one of a series of really important life events that affect people in different ways. ASOS has that wrap-around care because it understands that investing in the workforce is the right thing to do—to keep people in the workforce, keep them happy and keep them content.

Flexible working may not be an alternative, in the view of the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake), but different people have different responses to a life event such as miscarriage. It is a really personal experience. Some of those affected may want to stay at home; others may prefer to continue to work, or alternatively may need time off later. That is where flexible working can make a difference for many people, but not all people—as I say, it is a very personalised experience. Individuals are best placed to understand their own specific needs, and good employers will respond to requests made by their employees in a sensitive way.

[Paul Scully]

It is right that we showcase those employers doing well, and that we also explain that it is the right thing to do not only morally—from a humanity point of view—but from a business point of view. It makes no sense to take a different view from that of those far-sighted companies that are making a wider, longer-term investment in their workforces. However, we are in a difficult economic climate, and that cannot be ignored. We are mindful of placing additional burdens on business, but, as I have mentioned, we strongly encourage employers to go beyond the statutory minimum wherever they can.

The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East noted that miscarriage and the associated grief are not illness. However, when an event negatively affects someone's mental or physical health, they may have the option of taking sick leave, and may also be eligible for statutory sick pay. Employees who are able to claim sick pay can self-certify as sick for the first seven days that they are off work; after that time a fit note is required, and their employer can request medical evidence if they wish. In addition, there are protections in place for those who need to take sick leave following a miscarriage, which mean that any sick leave taken during the two-week period after pregnancy ends should not count towards a total sickness record or be used as a reason for redundancy or disciplinary action. Individuals who are not eligible for statutory sick pay and those who require additional support may be eligible for universal credit and the new-style employment and support allowance.

David Linden: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. It would be remiss to allow the debate to pass without putting on record that statutory sick pay on these islands is among the lowest rates in Europe. It is fine to talk about statutory sick pay, but not at the pitiful levels that the UK pays at the moment.

Paul Scully: I understand the hon. Member's point of view. I ask him to look at it in the round, alongside universal credit and other means of welfare. We have said we would always look at statutory sick pay, but we do not believe that now is the time to do it, as we are coming out of a pandemic. That is certainly something that we are keeping under review, as part of that wider holistic approach to welfare, benefits and workplace support.

All employees are also entitled to take 5.6 weeks a year of annual leave, in some cases more if their contract of employment allows. Normally, employees need to give notice of leave dates, but employers may agree to waive the notice period.

Olivia Blake: Can the Minister understand how deeply insulting it is to be told to take annual leave, having gone through a traumatic experience, and to take a holiday when grieving? Does the Minister understand how deeply offensive that is?

Paul Scully: That is exactly what I was going to say. That provision is there, and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—a good friend of mine—talked about people taking holiday leave to go through a miscarriage. When I have employed people, either here or in my

previous life running businesses, I would never have dreamed of counting absences for such life events as holiday. They may want to apply for it, but I would treat them far more sensitively, for the reasons given by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam. It is so important that businesses and employers have that approach, to invest in their time and future.

Angela Crawley: The Minister has worked extensively with me to find ways—through ACAS, for example—to ensure that employers can do more to support employees. If he accepts that sick leave, holiday pay and flexible working are not the correct methods to support an employee who has experienced pregnancy loss, and if he will not commit to a distinct miscarriage leave policy, will he consider extending bereavement leave to include parents who experience that loss before 24 weeks?

Paul Scully: We will outline employment measures when parliamentary time allows. The hon. Lady earlier talked about the Miscarriage Association pregnancy loss pledge. I am not in a position to commit to a pledge here and now but, looking at the sentiments in there, there are very sensible approaches that employers should take: encouraging a supportive work environment; understanding and implementing rules around pregnancy-related leave; ensuring that staff feel able to take time off if they need; showing empathy and understanding, which is seemingly fundamental and basic, though not all employers do so; encouraging line managers to access in-house or external guidance; supporting people back to work, by being responsive to those needs; and showing flexibility wherever they can. Those are all common sense, and it is great that they have been brought together in that pledge.

Having access to flexible working arrangements can be important for those who experience a traumatic life event of any sort. Changing a work pattern can provide individuals with the flexibility they need to balance their work commitments with their personal lives during such challenging times. Having a statutory right to request a temporary or permanent working arrangement can be important.

I have outlined some of the support and options that are also available to employees when they have suffered a loss. Businesses do have that important role to play. We have commissioned guidance from ACAS on managing a bereavement in the workplace, which has been well received and was updated in 2020, to take into account the introduction of parental bereavement leave.

The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East made it clear that miscarriage is not an illness. We want to ensure that grieving families and friends who have lost loved ones receive the support they need, when they need it. We have given more than £10 million to mental health charities, including bereavement charities, to support people through this. Our excellent NHS is also there to support individuals with mental health and wellbeing issues. I am pleased to have had this debate and appreciate the discussion and contributions.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Penrose Review: UK Competition and Consumer Policy

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered UK competition and consumer policy in response to the Penrose review.

It is good to have you looking after us, Mr Efford, to ensure that we do not misbehave during the course of the debate. It is good to see you in the Chair.

Just over a year ago, I was commissioned to write a report by the Treasury and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. It came out almost exactly a year ago and it is called, “Power To The People”. It is about competition policy and was produced at the request of the Government. A year after publication, I thought it was reasonably sensible to think that we might want to have a look at what has happened as a result of my recommendations—which ones have happened and which ones have not—hoping perhaps to goad, tease or otherwise persuade my hon. Friend the Minister to be as indiscreet as he possibly can be about what might happen in future, to fill in any gaps, and discuss the recommendations that have not yet taken place.

I will summarise briefly progress on implementing some of the recommendations in the report in the intervening year and I will focus fairly straightforwardly on the things that have not happened yet, so that the Minister has a text from which to work—if I may put it that way—and on the gaps that remain. To be fair, although I do not want to overclaim on this, it is true to say that there has been a reasonable amount of progress across Government on some of the recommendations in my report.

For example, there have been a series of consultations and commitments from the Competition and Markets Authority about the kind of changes that it wants to make to its internal processes and the way it works. One of the central recommendations in the report is that the CMA needs stronger consumer powers—upgraded to match its anti-trust competition powers—and a whole series of other things necessary for it to move faster to judgments in individual cases much more quickly. Ideally, in most cases—the easier cases—that should be within days or months, rather than in the current parlance, when things can easily run into years; we need faster and more certain decisions.

The CMA is supposed to upgrade its capability to become what I termed the “micro-economic sibling” to the Bank of England’s macroeconomic work. In other words, every time the Bank of England talks about the macro economy, the CMA should have a public role in putting forward our progress in creating supply-side reforms to improve competition in individual markets and in individual parts of the country. As we all know, our country has a real problem with declining levels of productivity and of competitiveness the further away from the M25 one travels.

The report therefore makes a series of recommendations, some prompting a series of consultations on internal reforms to the CMA, which are very welcome. There are things like the

“micro-economic sibling for the Bank of England”,

which I have just mentioned, which has been declared and is due to be set up. There have also been declarations that the CMA’s consumer powers will be upgraded in due course. We will need primary legislation for that, but there has been extensive consultation on it. There will also be things such as stronger penalties for companies that do not comply with data requests and so forth, seeking to slow down the progress of any competition cases. So, all—or mostly—good news in that area at least.

The CMA has also established something called the digital markets unit, the DMU, which will be absolutely essential to future operations in ensuring that we can deal with consumer detriment created by digital network monopolies—the big FANGs of Facebook, Amazon, Netflix and Google. The DMU is now in operation, but in shadow form, because it does not have any of the necessary legislated powers that it requires. It has at least started. There has also been an increase in the CMA’s resources post Brexit because, as we left the UK, we had to have a stronger domestic pro-competition set of institutions, otherwise all the things that had been happening in Brussels, in the EU’s competition world, would not have been coped with, so they were repatriated.

Equally, the ideas in the chapter on economic regulators are about trying to reduce the overall role of such regulators over time. We should be trying to normalise as much of the markets that they run as possible. There is no intrinsic reason why, for example, energy, telecommunications or others cannot be mostly normal and as usual, as run of the mill as buying a loaf of bread or a pint of milk. We do not need an economic regulator to protect us when we do that. There are large chunks of these markets where we could be just as protected by normal consumer protection laws, and would not need an economic regulator, except for the bits of those markets that are fundamentally based around network monopolies.

Every single one of the economically regulated sectors in our economy—telecoms, energy, water or any of the others—all have network monopolies at their core, whether it is electricity distribution, the national grid, local electricity distribution grids, gas pipes, water pipes or whatever it might be. There is a network monopoly at the core, and those are inherently less competitive. We cannot get them to work in the normal way, and there has to be a residual level of economic regulation on those networks. Perhaps there are some deeply embedded and hard-to-solve consumer detriments in finance, too. Other than that, we could and should seek to erode the role of the economic regulators over time, normalising their markets as far as we can, as this report recommends. It is not a quick process; it will take time, but it can and should be done, outside the areas I have just described.

How are we doing? In some respects, quite well. There is something called the “Economic Regulation Policy Paper”, which I am sure everybody here has been keeping next to their bed for bedtime reading. That came out of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy a couple of weeks ago, and is intended to address the statutory duties of the economic regulators,

[John Penrose]

and increase the level of competition they are involved with. It makes all the right noises and speaks all the right warm words about doing that. I will come back to that in a minute, because one of its problems is that, in modernising the statutory duties, to enable the process I have laid out, it is going to

“launch a review of utilities regulators’ statutory duties in 2022.”

It does not say when that is going to be launched, when it will be finished or what it will do about it when it is done. Everybody here will be familiar with the term “long grass”. I hope the Minister will be able to reassure us that this is not long grass, that it will happen in a timely way, and that he is out with his lawnmower trimming the sward to ensure that it will happen, rather than get parked somewhere and gently forgotten.

There is also good news on public procurement, which has been brought into sharp focus during the pandemic. We absolutely need to have a faster, better and more transparent public procurement process. We inherited this process from the EU as the OJEU—Official Journal of the European Union—rules. They do a lot of good things, but incredibly slowly and in bureaucratic fashion. As a result, we end up with processes that are clunky. When we have a national or international emergency, such as the pandemic, they are cruelly exposed as not working well enough.

I am pleased to say that there was when I published this, and there remains, a continuing commitment to launching a new public procurement Bill. That is due, probably not in this Session, but I hope in the next. It has been heavily trailed, and I hope and expect that it will take what we have and make it much more nimble, digital and open to small firms being able to compete with long-standing large incumbents, such as Carillion. It will not only be pro-competitive but will involve a great deal of better value for money for taxpayers. It will mean that we are less likely to have, for example, a scramble for personal protective equipment, if we have another national emergency such as the pandemic in future.

Finally, on the positive side of the ledger, there has been some progress on the ideas I talked about for trying to improve competition outside the south-east, and to improve retail opportunities for people who need redress, if they have been done wrong and their consumer rights have been breached. There has been a little progress on trying to make small claims courts and ombudsmen work better, more digitally and faster, while continuing to be cheap, so that there is ready justice, if necessary, for somebody who has not got what they paid for under consumer rights. That is all good, but we have a great deal further to travel.

My contention is that in a digital world, we should be able to have the same kind of 24/7 service that we expect when logging on to do our grocery shopping at 3 am—I do not do that, but some people do. That is something that, increasingly, we expect to be able to do. If we can shop 24/7, we should be able to seek redress 24/7 when that is needed, but there is a noticeable gap there.

Although that gap is starting to close, and there have been reforms of the small claims court for example, there has been no reform in other areas that need it, such as in the creation of county competition courts.

Such reform is necessary to create opportunity for small, local companies that are being ganged up on by larger local incumbents and prevented from prosecuting their competition rights, because taking someone to the Competition Appeal Tribunal in London for a breach of competition law is never going to be affordable.

Even under the current fast-track approval process, redress is still out of reach for most small regional firms. A restaurant in Bristol, an estate agent in Hull or an hotelier in Liverpool will not be able to afford to do anything if they are being ganged up on by a local competitor until we get what I am calling “county competition courts”. I am afraid that there has been little progress towards that at the moment. Nor has there been progress towards a generalised update and improvement of local trading standards teams. That is needed in many parts of the country to ensure that there are proper defenders of consumer rights.

I do not want to cavil too much, because there is a decent list of progress. It would be churlish to say that nothing has happened in the last year, because it really has. I commend the Government and my hon. Friend the Minister on that progress, but I am afraid that there is a slightly longer list—it is certainly a serious list—of things that have not yet happened on the other side of the ledger. I will run through them quickly, then leave it for others to pick up on any particular points.

First, one of the report’s central points is about speeding up how fast people can get justice through the CMA if they need it. As I mentioned at the start of my speech, we have to ensure that all but the most complicated, hideously difficult and groundbreaking cases can be decided by the CMA. Most cases ought to take weeks or months rather than years. At the moment, there is no overall core process redesign within the CMA or the Competition Appeal Tribunal, which is effectively the appeals court for lots of CMA cases. Such a redesign—if I can call it that—will be necessary to make dramatic improvements in the availability and certainty of justice.

That matters because at the moment, it is all too easy for large, well-lawyered incumbents to walk backwards, slowly, in the face of a challenge from a small, plucky entrepreneurial, insurgent firm that is trying to transform and disrupt a particular market. If they can strew legal obstacles in the challenger’s path, they can basically make it much harder for Britain’s economy to be nimble.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I appreciate what my hon. Friend says about competition. Does that apply to local authorities, which tend just to employ one arm’s length contractor when plenty of local people could bid for jobs such as road building and maintenance, for example?

John Penrose: That is a particularly good example of the kind of problem that I was referring to when I mentioned public procurement reforms. I think we should be all extremely interested in what they show. When those reforms come, they should mean that local government, as well as national Government and many arm’s length bodies—from the NHS to English Heritage, and everyone else in between—should be able to make much faster decisions in a way that is more accessible to small firms that are not equipped to wade through pages and pages of tender documents, some of which require a PhD and

actually have little to do with whether a product or service is better than the big incumbent's. That will be an essential change.

Speeding up the CMA is absolutely essential. One of the most glaring and—I am afraid to say—saddest omissions from the recommendations is on better regulation. There is a difference between deregulation and better regulation. I am sure that you are thoroughly familiar with it, Mr Efford, but for the record and for everybody else, deregulation is where standards are got rid of and there is a sort of race to the bottom—that is not what I am recommending in this report at all—whereas better regulation says, “How do we deliver the same standards in environmental quality, food standards, workers’ rights and all the other things that we regard as essential in our modern society, in a way that is cheaper, quicker, simpler, or more digital or more modern? How can we do that in a way that costs the providers of those things less?” If it costs the providers less, that means they can do it at lower cost, which means that consumers can get the same product or service at a lower price in the first place. It is up to everybody and it will be for all our benefit if we can do that.

However, getting rid of red tape and regulation is one of the hardest things to achieve in Westminster and Whitehall, because everybody here knows that the culture of this place is framed in terms of making new rules. That is how civil servants or—dare I say it?—one or two MPs make their career; it is by inventing new rules and not by getting rid of old ones. That is the culture of this place.

Better regulation is an extremely easy thing to say and an extremely difficult thing to do, although there have been examples—rare ones—in the past where we have succeeded. There was a brief flowering of success between 2010 and 2015, under David Cameron when he was Prime Minister, whereby the pro-regulatory ratchet got reversed and for a couple of years we were genuinely making progress, and in fact local firms and small firms and their organisations, particularly the Federation of Small Businesses and similar bodies, noticed it and said, “This is working”.

Unfortunately, when David Cameron left office, the blob pounced; I do not know whether a blob can pounce, but perhaps it enveloped the new regime. When David Cameron left office, the blob looked at what worked—basically, it was having a gateway condition saying, “If you are the Minister for paper clips, you can’t have new rules about paper clips until you have found two old ones to get rid of”; that was the thing that had been making things work until then—and said, “That’s a terribly old-fashioned way of doing it. We’ve got a much better way of doing it. Why don’t we have a big target and we’ll hit the target and that will be good?”

However, because the blob had got rid of all the rigour and all the mechanisms for getting rid of the red tape, what happened instead was that there was a huge target, which was completely missed. In two years, we went backwards, by £8 billion-worth of extra costs, when we had expected to remove £9 billion-worth of extra costs. Instead of removing £9 billion-worth of extra costs, we added £8 billion-worth, which was a £17 billion miss in two years.

That was absolutely disastrous compared with what we had been doing for the previous five years, and the thing that worries me is that it is being recommended

that we go back to something rather similar. I do not care whether it is one in, one out or one in, two out, but it is essential that we have that gateway condition, because if we do not have it we will carry on going backwards.

I am afraid, and very sorry to report, that the benefits of Brexit report—another piece of bedtime reading, Mr Efford, which I am sure you have gone through in detail—says on page 27 that we will not reintroduce the old system at all but will stick with the one that has just failed, and we will carry on repeating the same mistake that we made before. I really hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to tell me that that has now changed around, but I fear that he will be unable to. If we do not change around, then we will fail again, and—let us be very clear about it—that is what we are currently heading towards.

I have final thoughts on the economic regulators, Mr Efford; I am nearly there. As I say, we have had some progress here, because, as I mentioned, the Government have said that they are consulting on trying to improve the statutory duties of economic regulators to add extra competition, which should lead to shrinking the regulators over time.

However, as I also mentioned, we do not have a date for when the report on the economic regulators is due, so we do not know if anything will ever be done about them; I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to say that the Government will do something about them. Without a date and without a firm commitment in principle that the report will genuinely try to normalise as much of the market as it can, outside the network of monopolies that I was talking about, the suspicion has to be that we are not trying to normalise these markets and that what will happen—unacknowledged, but none the less firmly—is that there will be no appetite for normalising as much of these markets as we can, and that instead the preferred destination is perpetual heavy regulation. I really hope that my hon. Friend the Minister can reassure me that that is not the de facto intention behind what we are currently doing.

My final point is about the final chapter in the report, which is on subsidy control. Subsidies are a very heady political drug, if we are not really careful. No matter the political party we belong to, it is always tempting when lobbyists come knocking. It does not matter whether a Member is in opposition or in government, nor whether it is local government or national or sub-national Government. When lobbyists come knocking, they say how terrible it is that this big, important local employer has been left behind—it did not invest in whatever it was it was doing and is now 20 years out of date, so it has been overtaken by plucky entrepreneurial upstarts from other parts of the country or, indeed, from other countries—and they say, “Isn’t it terrible that these jobs are now at risk? What we need is a just a temporary wafer-thin subsidy to tide us over for a couple of years while we fix things.” Of course, they do not fix things and then, a couple of years later, they come back and ask for more.

That is expensive for taxpayers and it reduces both the productivity of industry and the long-term security and sustainability of British jobs, which become progressively more and more vulnerable to international competition. Ultimately, it is the thing that did for us in the 1960s and 1970s, and which we had enormous pain

[John Penrose]

trying to fix in the 1980s and 1990s. Subsidy control is vital. It is one of those rules that has just come back, post Brexit, from being run by Brussels. We have a Subsidy Control Bill before Parliament at the moment—it is in the Lords. It will do all sorts of really good things to speed up our subsidy control process; it is much more nimble and light-touch. If authorities are compliant with six or seven different principles—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): Seven.

John Penrose: I thank the Minister for that information. If they comply with seven different principles of good subsidy, as opposed to bad subsidy, they can just get on with it—whether that is a local council or a national Government Minister, or anybody in between.

That is fine, except that we are keeping them a secret. We are not telling anybody what the subsidies are that we are dishing out. The EU system, which is what we are trying to replace, says that it is necessary to disclose any subsidies above half a million euros, which is quite a high level, actually. It means that a lot of subsidies are never disclosed at all, particularly if they are dished out by local councils. We are saying that it is not necessary to declare any subsidies under half a million pounds. The last time I looked at the euro-pound exchange rate, that is a higher level of disclosure than the old EU system. There are some other levels that are a bit lower for other bits and pieces, about which I am sure the Minister will remind us.

However, broadly speaking, we are going to declare less in future: we will be less transparent than we were in the past. That leaves the door open to cronyism—to local authorities or national Governments dishing out money to their mates, secure in the knowledge that nobody will know because we will not be able to see. It also leaves the door open to higher levels of subsidisation, potentially of less competitive firms, and therefore to wasting taxpayers' money in future. Given what is happening to the cost of living at the moment, none of us wants to waste a single penny of hard-won taxpayers' money, particularly when we have to take it as taxes in the first place.

It is a curate's egg. It is sort of two cheers, rather than three, for what has been done so far. After a year, there has been genuine progress, and I am delighted to celebrate the points on the positive side of the ledger that I started off with. However, there is quite a lot—marginally more—on the negative side of the ledger; those things have not yet happened, but they could. The advantage is that most of the reforms that I have gone through—which have not yet happened, but which could—will not cost the Treasury a bean. They will not cost the taxpayer a bean. They will mean that British jobs and companies will become more competitive, more sustainable and safer in the long term, because, ultimately, the only thing that protects us against international competition is the fact that we are better than the international firms we compete against. It is a cheap route to economic success.

I am hoping, therefore, that it is a bit of a no-brainer. It is one of those things about which we say, "Why wouldn't you do all of this stuff? Why on earth would

you not?" The only reason, I am sure, is that there are genuinely significant vested interests behind some of these things that make them difficult to shift. However, we have a doughty warrior in the shape of the Government Minister responding to this debate. I am therefore looking forward to hearing how quickly he will be able to fight and smite the various different vested interests that would otherwise slow us down.

2.54 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I congratulate the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) on securing this debate and on the review. Given his doughty defence of non-regulation, I hesitate to propose more regulation, but I would like to see a new competition and consumer Bill in the next session of Parliament. It has never been more needed than now, given the effects of the two-year pandemic and the cost of living crisis.

The pandemic has led to more people buying online, and more people are putting in fake reviews. That is a scam, and it has left millions of consumers bruised, out of pocket and with little trust in the companies trying to sell them goods and services. More than seven in 10 consumers use online reviews to inform purchases. They do not go down to the pub and talk to their neighbours about their purchases; they have not been able to do so for two years. They use online reviews.

There have been review practices across many of the largest online platforms, including Amazon, Google and Facebook, and multiple sectors have seen a thriving market in commissioning and selling fake reviews. Which? has called for commissioning and incentivising a fake review to be added to the list of automatically unfair practices in schedule 1 to the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008, and I support that. Other than by looking reviews, where do people get information? What they need is the confidence that a review represents a verified purchase; that the review has been written by a real individual who was not given any money or incentive to buy a product; that the review was not for a free parcel that was delivered to the doorstep unknowingly; and that the review is honest. Sometimes, negative reviews are taken offline. People are told, "We'll give you £5 for a positive review", and if the review is not positive enough, they do not get the money.

There are other exploitative online practices, such as subscription traps and drip pricing. It is not about choosing the interests of the consumer over the interests of businesses, because the more effective consumer protection becomes, the more the UK economy benefits. It is a win-win. If consumers can trust businesses and their practices, they are more inclined to buy those companies' products. Crucially to the businesses, people then come back for more.

Particularly when people are thinking very carefully about how to spend their money, it is imperative that we encourage trust in businesses. Companies will then compete on their ability to meet customers' needs and provide real value, rather than on cutting corners or passing off shoddy products. Only the best businesses will survive, and that is as it should be. It is a partnership, because consumers and businesses both have the same interests at heart. Consumers want the best products at the best prices, and businesses want to sell them those things.

An important component of the legislation is around redress and alternative dispute resolution. Which? says that there should be mandatory dispute resolution schemes in key sectors that have a high volume of complaints and are often complex and high value. We have all seen, particularly through the pandemic, the problems that people have had getting refunds for air travel. Thousands of covid-related flight cancellations left people out of pocket, and the airlines have quite often chosen to ignore the law by refusing a refund. People have waited months, if not years, for those refunds. There are two ADR schemes in the aviation industry, but neither is compulsory to join. Ryanair left one scheme because it disagreed with the judgments relating to strikes by its air crew. Jetair, Emirates and others have failed to join any ADR scheme. If things go wrong, the passengers do not have any redress.

In early 2019, the all-party parliamentary group on consumer protection, which I chair, published a report calling for the wholesale reform of the ADR platform. We looked in detail at the various ombudsmen and ADR schemes and found enormous variation in how they operate. Some are statutory bodies, and some are not. Some cover all firms in the sector, because everyone has to join them, and some do not. Some can enforce the judgments, and some cannot. That creates total confusion for consumers, who are often left frustrated and do not know who to go to. Air travel was one of the areas where the statutory scheme was most keenly felt, and that was pre covid.

Our report said that what was needed was a powerful and accessible statutory ombudsman, which probably echoes the call from the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare about a 24/7 dispute resolution platform. People do not know where to go. They have to negotiate a difficult maze of ombudsmen. Who do they go to? There should be a single point of entry for all complaints, which should be passed through to the correct ombudsman. I think that there should be an ombudsman for travel, so that people do not think, “Some of my journey was air travel, but there was also a bit of rail. Was it the delay on the railway that led to my missing the plane?” It gets far too confusing for the consumer. People often buy a package, which includes the flights and hotel. Is that a package, or are there separate bookings for the flights and the hotel? Some companies have said, “You booked the flights and hotel with us, but it is not a package, because they were booked separately.” When one part goes wrong, to whom do people turn? That is why we need an ombudsman for the whole travel industry; I think that is the model in Germany.

We also need to look at enforcement. The CMA is responsible for the enforcement of consumer law in precedent setting and market-wide cases, but it lacks the power to effectively protect consumer rights and deter companies. In order to enforce a decision, there is a lengthy court process, and a company can be fined only if it fails to comply with a court order. One example of that is the issue with the ticket seller Viagogo. It took six years for Viagogo to be forced to change its practices and follow the CMA guidance on the information it gives to consumers. In Canada, however, the secondary ticketing sites Ticketmaster and StubHub had immediate fines of 4 million Canadian dollars and 5 million Canadian dollars in costs. They also received a fine of 1.3 million Canadian dollars for not complying with a previous

warning. Compare that with a process that took six years, during which time Viagogo could rip off consumers. It is just not good enough.

There are other examples of companies in the travel and wedding sectors that, despite clear guidance from the CMA, were very slow to offer refunds and unlawfully held on to customers’ money for months and months after the cancellation of services—by them, not by consumers. We need a simplified process of investigation, and we need the CMA to have greater powers—along the lines of those enjoyed by the other UK regulators, such as the Financial Conduct Authority and the Information Commissioner’s Office—to raise standards and challenge companies that fail to comply. We have the power to do that, but it needs some teeth. It is no use having regulation and legislation unless it can be enforced easily for consumers, who are often deterred by a long, complex process; indeed, some businesses rely on that.

We are all consumers. Most of the time, things go smoothly, but it is when things go wrong that the gaps in protection are exposed. Limiting that exposure is vital in order to give consumers the confidence to make more purchases without the undue stress and worry that many have had to go through in the past.

3.3 pm

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) on securing this crucial debate and on his excellent work not only on his review, but as the UK’s anti-corruption champion. His review is a vital piece of work and reveals how our competition policy can drive enterprise, productivity and growth. I am pleased to recognise that more competition and support for small businesses outside the south-east is key to our levelling-up agenda.

I speak as the Member for Truro and Falmouth in Cornwall, which has an economy built on fantastic small businesses, with three quarters of local companies employing fewer than five people. Although the terms “competition law” and “competition policy” might seem far removed from our everyday lives, it can be argued that failing to create a better regulatory regime that fully supports small businesses, consumers and fair competition has led to higher prices and lower wages in Cornwall for much of the last decade. We must unpick the fact that Cornwall has the lowest productivity levels anywhere in the UK, and that places the region at the heart of the Government’s levelling-up agenda. I draw the House’s attention to section 6 of the report, which shows that Britain has a well-known productivity problem, especially outside the south-east.

Our geographical skew in productivity is not normal; only two other European countries, Poland and Romania, have bigger variations than we have. That difference translates into everyone’s wages. In Cornwall, one in three workers earn below the national living wage, and much of the employment in Cornwall is reliant on two low-paying industry groups, namely hospitality and retail. They are sources of pride for Cornwall and its flourishing tourism sector, but it is inescapable that both are sources of low pay and low productivity.

Against a backdrop of rapid change in the world of work and the need to increase productivity, action to improve skills in Cornwall is crucial. Investing in skills

[Cherilyn Mackrory]

will attract more competitive and successful firms, creating a virtuous circle that attracts more high-skilled people to live and work in the area—boosting productivity, jobs and wages even further.

I am in talks with BEIS and other Government officials about the lithium that is under our feet in Cornwall. We are very lucky, geologically. Few people realise that there is enough lithium under the Cornish soil to power at least half of the electric vehicles that we will need in the future. Cornwall is very good at getting things out of the ground and sending them away, but we need to make sure that all the processing to get the lithium to a battery-ready status also happens in the county, creating long-term jobs. To do that, we will have to compete with firms in China and other overseas players. That makes it difficult, and that is why we need to work with Government to make sure that the processing happens locally.

I am pleased with recent progress, such as the news that the excellent team at Truro and Penwith College have applied to the skills accelerator programme, ushering in a new approach that ensures that all technical education and training is based on what employers actually need. That is yet another example of the principal Martin Tucker and his brilliant team at Truro and Penwith leading the way with excellence and innovation in the learning and skills sector. It adds to their strong existing offer, which includes free skills bootcamps in digital and technical careers and the higher level skills project, to support individuals looking to enhance their knowledge and develop their careers.

We must consider all the options on the table to increase the region's productivity. The report makes several crucial recommendations to reform competition policy and put consumers at the heart of markets, and I urge the Government to consider those recommendations. In particular, the report notes that to raise productivity in areas such as Cornwall, we need to boost the "local competitive temperature" by supporting small businesses to compete with large competitors. That was what I was driving at in my earlier intervention.

I want to highlight two areas of the report: reducing the burden of red tape and supporting digital industries. Laws and regulations are a crucial part of our market economy, as we have already said. They protect staff, consumers and the environment. I have been very vocal about the need for strong regulations on water companies, which are currently responsible for much of the pollution in our rivers, including the River Fal in my constituency. I agree that we need better regulation that maintains standards but applies them in the least costly and most unbureaucratic way possible.

In particular, we must address the growing crisis in the fishing sector that is caused by complicated new export rules, a lack of clarity about fishing quotas and an increase in red tape. At this point, I have to declare an interest as a fishwife—these are issues that I hear about at the breakfast table daily. Those changes have significantly hit our shellfish producers in particular, and some businesses face the real possibility of collapse unless we take urgent action. The fishing industry plays a vital role in the Cornish economy, and I urge the Government to step in and address the issues to secure its long-term future.

We have a lot of small producers in Cornwall, and up until very recently their only option has been to take their catch to market. A couple of years ago, a fisherman might have received £1.50 for a kilo of mackerel at market. They could go into the supermarket the same day and see lesser quality, net-caught fish of the same type—fish that had been in a net for a couple of days and was not as fresh as line caught—and the consumer would be paying something like £10 or £12 a kilo for it. Somebody is making an awful lot of money out of that fish, and it is not the food producer; it is not the fisherman. I am pleased that the Government have been encouraging direct sales, but I encourage them to further reduce the red tape that these boys and girls have to put themselves through to ensure that they can sell directly to farm shops and even, if possible, directly to supermarkets.

I support the report's proposals for a new pro-competition regime for digital markets. Digital technologies bring us many benefits, transforming our economy, society and daily lives. However, there are downsides caused by firms with enormous network and digital data monopolies, so we must ensure that digital regulation promotes competition and innovation. Digital industries are a growing part of the economy in Cornwall, which has a rapidly expanding digital and creative community that has grown by 76% since 2010. I will do all I can to support the Government to ensure that we build a pro-growth data regime that will allow the digital industry in Cornwall to thrive.

Improving productivity in areas such as Cornwall is key to levelling up in the UK, and that is why it is important that we invest in skills and reform to make better regulation in industries such as fishing and all the way to digital markets. I look forward to supporting the Government as they consider the recommendations of the report, and I will continue to champion all our small businesses, innovation and competition now and in the years to come.

3.10 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) on his report and on securing this important debate. I particularly want to address his comments on the digital markets unit, which he says has been set up in shadow form. We eagerly anticipate the Queen's Speech to see whether there is legislation in the next Session to give the unit the power that it needs.

So much of our commerce and consumer interaction takes place through digital services. We have seen that more than ever during the pandemic. They are an integral part of the economy. It is right that we question and challenge whether digital markets are truly competitive, and whether the very large players that dominate them are guilty of abuse of market power, given the great positions that they hold.

It is tempting to think, "There are a lot of big digital companies; presumably they all compete against each other, and that creates a fair market." When we break that market down, we see a series of monopolies in each sector. Unsurprisingly, Google has 92% of the world's search business; Chrome, which is owned by Google, has 62% of the browser market; and Facebook and Google together control about 70% of the digital display advertising market worldwide.

Mobile phones run on one of two operating systems: 70% run on the Android operating system, which is owned by Google, and 30% on iOS, which is owned by Apple. You might think, “Well, at least there is a market split there,” but they are both monopolies. Apple customers—I am one; I have an iPhone—have no choice but to purchase apps through the App Store; there is no interoperable or alternative system. I cannot use a different app store system, such as the Google app store, to download apps on to an Apple product, or the other way around. The mobile communication devices market, which is central to the world economy, is dominated by only two operating systems, both of which are monopolies for their users.

As for the messaging app market in the UK, WhatsApp has 75% market penetration. The next most popular messaging app is Facebook Messenger, which has nearly 60% market penetration—that is, 60% of people in this market use it. Of course, people have multiple messaging apps. Both are owned by the same company. Across digital markets, there are these relative monopolies.

Is there evidence of abuse of market power? There is certainly evidence of these companies treating customers differently. There is evidence that Apple has different policies on charges for selling through the App Store for different companies. It does not charge everyone the same amount. Facebook has allowed different businesses to acquire different levels of Facebook data to help them drive their business through the Facebook systems, depending on the value of the commercial relationship to Facebook. When I chaired the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee, we published evidence that we secured from an American app developer that showed that Facebook sometimes made arbitrary determinations about whether an app developer should have access to the Facebook graph at all; it depended on whether Facebook thought that the product that the company was developing was a threat to its business.

Some people may remember from the dim and distant past the short film app called Vine, which was very popular. People uploaded very short films to it. Mark Zuckerberg personally decided that Vine was acquiring too much Facebook data, so Facebook kicked Vine off the platform. An email was published in which Mark Zuckerberg was asked to confirm that he wanted to do that, and he replied, “Yup, go for it.” In our report, the creators of Vine said they remembered that moment as though it were yesterday, because it was the moment that effectively killed their business. The chief exec of a global tech company can, like the Emperor Augustus, put their thumb up or down, and determine whether a business is allowed to succeed, based on his assessment of whether that business is a competitor to his.

We often say, “Why is it that, particularly in the tech sector, although the UK produces brilliant, thriving companies, they do not go to scale?” One of the reasons is that if they are too successful, they are squeezed out of the market by bigger, dominant players, which either deny them fair access to customers through their platform, give them the option of being acquired, or drive them out of business altogether.

There have been competition investigations into preferential ranking on Apple and Google systems, to see whether Google search results favour businesses with which Google has a commercial relationship, with to the detriment of others that it sees as competitors.

Amazon can monitor whether a product is successful, who is buying it, and, if it is too successful, whether it should copy it and launch its own product. Amazon does not give customer purchase data to businesses that sell through Amazon. Amazon is both the creator of the infrastructure through which businesses sell to their customers, and sells its own products alongside them, giving it immense market power.

We need a digital markets unit that ensures not only that consumers are treated fairly, that they have fair pricing and that there is fair competition among products, but that businesses that reach their customers through other tech platforms are treated fairly. It should ensure that businesses pay a fair rate for advertising, have fair access to data relative to other businesses, and are not a victim of aggressive pricing against them by the platform, or dis-ranked or downgraded through pure prejudice. All those aspects are central to the working of the digital economy today, and that is why it is important that we have a digital markets unit with the ability to launch investigations for evidence of tech platforms abusing their market power over other businesses, to the detriment of consumer interest.

3.16 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to participate in this debate on UK competition and consumer policy in response to the Penrose review. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) for all his work on the review. The goals of the Penrose review, which are to improve consumer choice and outcomes, are, of course, very important; they are things that we can all sign up to. Now more than ever, with household budgets being badly squeezed in this cost of living crisis, consumers must be supported, so that they can secure the best value for money and have sufficient protection under the law. For that to happen, we need UK competition and consumer protection that is fit for the modern age.

Consumers need confidence that if they fall victim to exploitation and unscrupulous practices, there is redress and the consumer protection that they need and deserve. It is clear that some markets simply do not work for the consumer. I understand that the clear statement of intent in the Penrose review was that markets must work for people, not the other way round. Who could argue with that?

Consumer confidence is essential for economic growth, so it is worrying that research by consumer champion Which? has found that up to one third of consumers experience at least one problem with a product or service every year. That not only causes financial loss and anxiety but has a detrimental impact on consumer confidence. We all know that there are gaps in consumer protection and enforcement, some of which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. For example, we all witnessed how the disruption to the travel industry during covid left passengers out of pocket when airlines either refused to pay for cancelled flights or delayed refunds.

Digital markets are not subject to the same regulations as their offline counterparts, and that opens the door to fake products reviews, which have exploded on online marketplaces. We heard a lot about that from the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue). Members in all parts of this Chamber have expressed concerns about digital markets, and our constituents share those concerns.

[Patricia Gibson]

The situation is made worse by the fact that regulators do not have the necessary powers to hold companies to account when the law is flouted. The Competition and Markets Authority does what it can to uphold consumer law, but its investigations can take years and tend to result in commitments instead of fines, and offer little in the way of deterrents for those who would flout the law. The problem is that to be more effective, the CMA needs more powers to properly perform the task of protecting consumer rights.

I note with interest the conclusions of the Penrose review, which proposes that the Competition and Markets Authority be given sharper teeth, so that it has increased power to drive consumer rights, supply-side reforms and productivity improvements. It also proposes a streamlined legislative framework for UK competition and consumer policy.

Of greater interest is the question of which of the Penrose conclusions the UK Government will take forward. Indeed, if the Penrose review is implemented in full, it could constitute the biggest shake-up of the UK's competition and consumer law regime since the creation of the Competition and Markets Authority in 2014. The changes would range from providing the Competition and Markets Authority with the same powers to prosecute consumer law cases as it has for competition law investigations to reforming sectoral regulations. The review contains some very interesting ideas and would give the Competition and Markets Authority significantly increased powers.

However, concerns have been expressed that concentrating such increased power in the Competition and Markets Authority at a time when it is adapting to its new post-Brexit case load and the challenges of a digitised economy could be very challenging indeed for the CMA. We simply do not know yet what the Government response to the Penrose review will be, although it does appear—I underline the word “appear”—that the Chancellor and the Business Secretary have welcomed the recommendations. The question is: where do we go from here?

We have all waited so long. The chair of the Competition and Markets Authority, Lord Tyrie, set out recommendations for reform in 2019. In 2020, the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare was asked by the Government to look into competition, and he published his report last year. The UK Government recognised the need to reform the enforcement regime in their 2019 manifesto, and the Departments for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, have undertaken consultations.

Last year, the Business Secretary set out plans to bolster competition regimes, but that must be underpinned by legislation. Consumer and competition policy has been under review for over four years, which has meant that the challenges that consumers face in the marketplace have continued, and have often become much more difficult. If the Competition and Markets Authority had more power, as other regulators do—enough power to protect consumers and hold companies accountable for breaking consumer law—we could raise standards in the consumer marketplace.

We can see clearly what the lack of such powers can lead to in practice. We have had the example of the secondary ticketing platform Viagogo for six years;

after the threat of legal action, it finally changed its practices and paid attention to the Competition and Markets Authority guidance on advising consumers. Had the immediate imposition of fines for not complying with guidance been an option, it would not have taken six years for Viagogo to comply, and for us to secure the changes that everybody wanted. We have all seen that the Competition and Markets Authority lacked the power it needed, during the time of covid disruption, to ensure that consumers were refunded in a reasonable timeframe by some players in the travel and wedding sectors.

A consumer and competition Bill could tackle the bad business practices that harm consumers and consumer confidence. There could be simpler investigation procedures, and fines could be imposed, so that matters were not dragged through the courts in lengthy processes, as the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare said. That would be nothing but a boon to consumer confidence and protection.

I agree with the call in the report for stronger protections for consumers against the so-called loyalty penalty, unfair contractual terms, perceived attempts by digital businesses to nudge consumers into making decisions, making it hard for consumers to exit contracts, and of course the practice of creating an unreal sense of urgency to pressurise consumers into making purchases, as well as trapping them in subscriptions.

A code of conduct would benefit both business and consumers. It would ensure that the largest online platforms did not abuse their market power. There would also be an alternative dispute resolution scheme that offered an efficient, affordable and proportionate route for resolving difficulties relating to high-value transactions while avoiding the complexity and cost of going to small claims court.

Finally, a consumer and competition Bill must be introduced in the upcoming programme for Government. That would be the point at which all the work that has been done at last comes to fruition—when a competition and enforcement framework fit for the modern economy is delivered through legislation. There is real impatience for the Government to finally commit to action on these important consumer protection matters. It is not clear how far the Government will go in improving competition and consumer policy. We do not know how they will interpret and implement the recommendations of the Penrose review. Perhaps the Minister will enlighten us.

Alongside the proposals made by the chair of the Competition and Markets Authority, Lord Tyrie, we have had consultations by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and the Penrose review. What we have not yet had is the introduction of a consumer and competition Bill. We all look forward to a Bill with proper teeth that will confer real power on the Competition and Markets Authority, so that it can support consumer confidence and create a marketplace in which the consumer is protected, and in which, as the Penrose review boldly set out, the market works for people, not the other way around.

I look forward to this long-promised, long-awaited and much-anticipated Bill. I hope the Minister will at least say when we will be able to see and scrutinise it.

3.26 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) for initiating this debate, and for his work on this issue. His very important “Power to the People” report was published around a year ago. In his opening remarks, he clearly laid out the sentiments and recommendations of the report, as well as, importantly, the context of declining competitiveness, the productivity challenge we face and the importance of making sure that we can act against the non-compliance of companies that do not play their part, so that we can ensure a fair regime for all businesses and for consumers. He rightly raised points about the vested interests that distort our markets.

Competition law seeks to curb practices that undermine or restrict competition to the detriment of consumers. Those practices can include a firm’s abuse of its dominant market position, anti-competitive practices, and mergers or takeovers that, if allowed, would result in a substantial lessening of competition. There has been a rapid increase in takeovers and mergers, particularly during the pandemic lockdowns, so that is an area that needs further work. I will come back to that.

Labour welcomed the Penrose report, and also highlighted where it needed to go further. UK markets are becoming more concentrated, and that hits consumers and workers, and stops small businesses in their tracks and prevents them from progressing. We want a re-evaluation of the role of the Competition and Markets Authority to ensure that it has the tools to tackle the growing concentration of market power.

We may disagree on rolling back economic regulation, but the issue is not necessarily the principle; it is more about asking whether we have the regulations we need for effective regulation of markets for consumers. That may not be about quantity; I think it is about quality. That is where the debate needs to start. I am not interested in regulation for regulation’s sake. For me, regulation is about purpose; it is about making sure that it will be effective and deliver the outcomes that we believe are necessary. We need more robust competition policy; we need to crack down on tax avoidance, and challenge mergers and acquisitions that mean taking on unsustainable debt, or that are not in Britain’s long-term strategic interests.

I thank all hon. Members who have contributed; they have made important and distinct contributions highlighted different areas of the subject. We in this House have long known about the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) does on consumer protection. She raised important issues around fake reviews—reviews are part of how consumers are informed—and around how action can be taken when consumers are misinformed. She also raised the important point that consumers and businesses have a common interest in making sure that markets work effectively and fairly. She highlighted the importance of ensuring that reform is based on how consumers behave today, how the market works and how consumers receive their goods and services. Many of those issues are interconnected. She rightly alluded to the important work of Which? in this area, and I thank it for its contribution.

The hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) shared a rich picture of her constituency, the opportunities and sectoral issues in her local economy and the challenges in taking forward some of those opportunities. The hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) highlighted clearly the dominance of power of the social media companies, which is an important backdrop to the digital markets reform that we have discussed. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) talked about the importance of value for money and consumer protection. Some of the issues that she raised, like those raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield, were very powerful.

Focusing on consumer interest has never been more important given the cost of living crisis that consumers face. Inflation is out of control, with energy, food and petrol prices rocketing. It is not just about global factors; we know that poor Government economic management has left us uniquely exposed. We have a buy now, pay later loan scheme for energy bills, rather than dealing with the problems in our energy market. We are very worried about raising taxes on working people and businesses at the worst possible time. In parallel to our debate, an Opposition day debate is taking place to call on the Government, again, to stop the national insurance rise in April.

There has been a long journey of reform. Hon. Members will be aware that when Labour was in power, we argued strongly that UK regulation of anti-competitive practices was weak. That led to one of our first pieces of legislation, the Competition Act 1998. That recent journey is worth noting, because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield said, it has been four years since the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy asked the CMA for proposals to better protect consumers in the digital economy and improve public trust in markets.

The then CMA chairman, Lord Tyrie, outlined his proposals to the Secretary of State in a letter in 2019. The Penrose review followed in February 2021. Last summer, the Government published two consultation documents—the first on reforming competition and consumer policy and the second on a pro-competition regime for digital markets. Both sets of proposals would require legislation to take forward some of the challenges raised, but the Government have yet to publish their response to either of those consultations.

I recognise that both the Penrose review and the Government’s consultation represent some progress in addressing the rules governing the UK’s companies and markets, not least as they recognise that reform is necessary. They are also vehicles for reforming the UK anti-trust regime post covid and post Brexit. The Penrose review is very important in that respect. The existing system, however, is no longer serving consumers appropriately, and is not fit for purpose in a digital age. It could lead to new monopolies created at any time in new markets.

John Penrose: It sounds as though the hon. Lady is joining other Members in saying that we need a new competition and consumer Act to fix some of those things. Could she confirm that that is the Labour party’s position? I think that is what she is saying, but I do not want to put words in her mouth.

Seema Malhotra: I will come on to that, but I think we need legislation. We hope that will be announced in the next Queen's Speech, but I will come back to that.

There seems to be broad consensus for providing the regulators, including the CMA and the Competition Appeal Tribunal, with more powers to protect consumers and hold companies accountable if they are not found to be playing by the rules. That is a positive step. However, so far—I say this gently—the Penrose review and the Government's consultation are a missed opportunity for a more fundamental review and reform of the UK marketplace. Even the CMA, which is now responsible for all anti-competitive practices that affect UK markets and consumers, has said that comments in the Government's consultation on reforming competition and consumer policy amounted to

“incremental, rather than radical, change to the competition regime.”

Let me mention resources, which are needed to make any regime effective, an issue that was raised yesterday in the debate on economic crime. Powers and resources for investigation and enforcement are absolutely critical. They are the other side of the coin to policy, and are about how we make sure that any regime is implemented effectively.

I want to focus on four areas to which I hope the Minister will respond. In large part, they reflect the comments already made, with one or two extra points.

First, on digital competition and regulation, digital is changing our economy. It is changing how the economy works, the products we have, how we receive services, how consumers purchase those services and how businesses trade with each other. There is a huge concentration of power in the big digital firms, with consequences for monopolisation, consumer rights and prices, as well as access to markets for new firms, as has been mentioned already. We know that tackling these issues needs international co-operation.

The Government have embarked on the creation of a digital markets unit in the CMA, which was set up on a non-statutory basis last April. I hope we will hear when that will be moved to a statutory footing and be given the teeth it needs.

Will Bills on competition and consumer law reform and on digital markets be in the Queen's Speech? Perhaps the Minister can share with us in this Chamber—we will take it no further; it will stay within these four walls—whether that legislation will come forward.

Secondly, on powers for the CMA and the speeding up of investigations, the Penrose review made a recommendation for a taskforce on how we can make sure that CMA investigations are more effective. It is important to get justice for consumers, as the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare said. What more are the Government planning to do in that area? There are other instances of unfairness and questionable policy. One example really struck me before Christmas. Royal Mail highlighted 23 areas that would see a reduction in service pre-Christmas, but that came on the back of £400 million in dividends being announced the month before. It does not seem right that there is no accountability for that sort of decision making.

There is some positive news. In its response to the Penrose review, the CMA announced that it is creating a dedicated microeconomic unit, which the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare called for, and which I understand will be based in Darlington at the Treasury campus.

Thirdly, on the public interest test, Labour has proposed the introduction of a broad public interest test for mergers and acquisitions. That would give the Government powers to review transactions, impose conditions and block transactions where they could have negative, long-term implications for the UK's industrial strategy, economy and jobs. The Government have powers under the Enterprise Act 2002 to intervene in mergers and acquisitions where they raise issues of national security, stability of the UK financial system, media plurality or maintaining in the UK the ability to combat and mitigate the effects of public health emergencies.

We are calling for the Enterprise Act 2016 to be expanded to include a public interest test where an acquisition may have long-term implications for the UK's industrial strategy. In our view, that goes further than the Penrose review in strengthening the interests of consumers, and we believe that we need a debate on how the CMA should move past narrow competition and consumer interests to public interest. On takeovers and mergers, that could apply to consumer interest but also to the impact on supply chains, employees and the public interest more generally, which has implications for consumer interests. As is consistent with the approach that the Minister will know we took on the Subsidy Control Bill, we need the CMA to have more diverse voices in its leadership, including reforms to the authority to make it more representative of the nations and regions of the UK.

I will just comment briefly on hollowed-out local enforcement. Our consumer protection regime has been weakened by 10 years of degradation of local authority trading standards teams. That is a serious issue. The number of LATS officers has been cut by more than 50% since 2010, while 45% of local authority trading standards teams say they do not have the resources to deal with consumer issues in their area. I note that the Penrose review has called for action on that and I would be grateful for the Minister's confirmation that some of the recommendations in the review will form part of his package of reforms later this year.

In conclusion, Labour welcomes competition and consumer choice in the UK as a sign of a healthy, functioning market economy. We are committed to making the UK the best place in the world to start and grow a business, and we believe that that is important as part of a pro-business, pro-society, pro-worker agenda to be built for Britain. We are ready and waiting for Parliament to have the opportunity to act and to build on the Penrose review. We believe that the Government have been a little too slow, so I hope that the Minister will give us confidence that things will be speeded up. I look forward to working with him and with colleagues from across the House on this important agenda as it moves forward.

3.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) on securing the debate and on his report. Wolfie Smith will be turning in his Afghan coat when he sees that “Power to the People” has become the mantra for fixing broken markets to encourage good competition and free markets, but the report is an

interesting read. That reference got tumbleweed from some of the younger Members, but I hope that my hon. Friend remembers Wolfie Smith.

My hon. Friend's report is an important contribution to the debate on reforming the UK's competition policy. It has had a significant role in shaping the Government's thinking on the priorities for reform, and I reiterate my thanks to him for his work and for his continuing engagement with and advocacy for reform.

In the report, my hon. Friend argues that the UK's competition and consumer regime should be one of the best in the world and the Government are absolutely four-square behind that objective. Now that the UK has left the EU, we must build on this country's innovative foundations to create a robust and agile economy that works for everyone and that is fit for future generations.

Competition and consumer policy has a central role in creating a thriving free market economy that encourages innovation, enterprise, growth and productivity. Competition policy is crucial in creating the right conditions for healthy competition between traders in markets to win over consumers by offering the best deals and innovation. Consumer policy is vital in underpinning consumer confidence. It empowers consumers to engage in markets in an assured manner, knowing that they have a strong set of legal rights that will be respected and enforced.

That is why we committed in our manifesto to give the CMA enhanced powers to tackle consumer rip-offs and bad business practices. It is also why the Government committed in our plan for growth to the UK's having a best in class competition regime that will raise innovation and investment across the economy.

An effective competition and consumer policy will help us to build back a better and fairer economy, giving businesses confidence that they are competing on fair terms and giving the public confidence that they are getting a good deal. The UK's competition regime is already well regarded internationally, so we are starting from a strong foundation. However, we should always strive to be better and to go further.

Markets and the way that consumers and businesses engage with each other have changed dramatically since the current legislation was enacted. That change is particularly stark in the digital economy. The tech revolution has brought huge benefits. Recent research has shown that about 15% of all businesses have adopted at least one artificial intelligence technology. In recent years, we have also seen that some digital markets have certain characteristics that make them more prone to weak competition.

Despite the actions that the UK has taken to promote competition, there is evidence from the CMA that competition may have weakened over the last 20 years. In 2020, the Government commissioned the CMA to produce an expert state of competition assessment to improve our collective understanding of the level and nature of competition across the UK economy. In its first "State of UK Competition" report, the CMA found that mark-ups, the ratio of prices to costs, had increased by 7% from 2000 to 2018. It found that in 2018 the average combined market share of the 10 largest firms in an industry was 3% higher than in 1998. It is essential that the competition regime does more to encourage and maintain competitive markets.

The Government published two consultations on legislative reforms in July last year, building on the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare. The consultation, "Reforming Competition and Consumer Policy", set out a vision for the future of our competition and consumer policy. The separate consultation, "A New Pro-Competition Regime for Digital Markets", set out a vision for a new agile and flexible regime to promote competition in digital markets, something that my hon. Friends the Members for Weston-super-Mare and for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) highlighted that we need to improve.

The package of reforms in the Government's two consultations shares the ambitions of the report by my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare. Those proposals seek to enhance the powers of the CMA and consumers' rights, and ensure that those rights are robustly enforced. They will work to protect consumers and help businesses thrive. In addition to sharing those ambitions, my hon. Friend's detailed report has had a considerable influence on where Government see opportunities for reform.

John Penrose: Will the Minister clarify when the Government expect to respond to the consultations he mentions? Clearly, they will inform what might or might not be in any future competition and consumer Act.

Paul Scully: Indeed. My hon. Friend is right to have used the near anniversary of his report as an opportunity to discuss the issue. Unfortunately, he has slightly missed the target of the consultation response, which we hope to bring forward very shortly. To answer my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory), the Penrose report did not need Her Majesty to give a notification that it was coming forward. Unfortunately, I cannot pre-empt what Her Majesty will say in the Queen's Speech about future legislation.

A central recommendation of the Penrose report, which my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare has repeated today, is that the Government should take steps to ensure that the enforcement of competition and consumer law speeds up to keep pace with the modern digitising economy. We agree and propose a range of measures to make enforcement more efficient. For instance, we propose that the CMA should have stronger powers to penalise businesses that obstruct or slow down investigation. The Government have also proposed new ways for businesses and the CMA to reach agreements on the actions needed to resolve competition issues in market-wide investigations and merger reviews. Both those changes were recommended by my hon. Friend in his report.

He also recognised the need for UK competition regulators to work in partnership with regulators overseas, to help address competition and consumer issues that span borders. We agree that effective international co-operation is an important part of the UK's competition and consumer regime. Promoting that co-operation is a key objective in our free trade agreements, and we have successfully secured text on that in the UK's recent agreements with Australia and New Zealand. We have consulted on legislative proposals to ensure that the CMA and consumer authorities can work as effectively as possible with their international counterparts.

[Paul Scully]

My hon. Friend's report also emphasised the role of consumer protection law in empowering consumers and driving effective competition. We agree that our already strong consumer rights framework must continue to support consumers into the future, allowing them to benefit from new technology and business models and to feel empowered to make the best decisions available to them. We have consulted on measures to tackle subscription traps, where a consumer enters into a subscription for a product or service but has difficulty leaving. We have also consulted on measures to tackle fake reviews, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), which undermine competition and give unfair advantage to traders who are willing to use them.

In taking steps to strengthen the protections for consumers, the Government are aware of the need to consider any new burdens on businesses. We want to ensure that consumers get that fair deal and that businesses are not overburdened by regulatory barriers. My hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare is absolutely right to talk about better regulation, and I will speak a little more about that, if I have time.

My hon. Friend talked about how we can have better dispute resolution, because when consumers enforce their rights, poorly performing firms face more pressure, and consumers know they can trust the system to be on their side if they need it. That is what we need.

John Penrose: The Minister is being very generous. I just want to press him a bit on the point about better regulation. So far, he has not said that he wants to go back to one in, one out, or to one in, two out. Could he clarify what mechanism the Government have to ensure that better regulation happens, as opposed to being wished for with a target that will not be hit?

Paul Scully: We consulted on reforming the better regulation framework, and the Government do not think that a one in, two out rule—or whatever number out—is consistent with delivering world-class regulation to support the economy in adapting to a new wave of the technological revolution or in achieving net zero, so we want to reduce costs to business wherever we sensibly can do so and regulate only where strictly necessary. We intend to do that by looking at the merits of each case rather than using the one in, two out system, and we plan to change the better regulation system so that it will do that. However, it is very important that we get the balance right.

The Government believe that a well-functioning alternative dispute resolution system can make markets work more effectively, increase consumer confidence in spending and generate higher trader compliance with the law. It is an important avenue to redress for consumers that more easily allows for mediated settlements and is less confrontational than a court process, which is often more costly and time intensive, so we sought views on proposals to enhance the role of ADR in resolving consumer disputes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare also recommended that the CMA's civil consumer enforcement powers should be upgraded, which would allow it to decide cases and impose fines in the same way as it does for civil enforcement of competition law. Again, we sought views on empowering the CMA to

enforce consumer law directly, and we consulted on giving the CMA new powers to decide whether consumer law has been broken. Under the proposal, the CMA could directly impose directions, remedies or monetary penalties on firms that mistreat their customers without having to go through the courts, as is currently the case. That would allow the CMA to intervene earlier and to go further.

My hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare also mentioned the CAT. I have to say that although there are plenty more things that the CAT could do, changes have been brought on by covid. I visited CAT's virtual court the other day, when it heard the case of Newcastle United's takeover by the Saudi buyers. It had 35,000 people tuning in, which is more than all but the top nine average gates in the premier league, so a lot of Geordies and Newcastle fans elsewhere are now experts on competition law—I am not sure whether that is a good thing or a bad thing. None the less, it really shines a light—being with the transparency tsar—on the work of the CAT and the competition regime.

Clearly, there are also challenges in some markets in the digital economy, which my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe talked about. That is why we looked at what we can do to have a bespoke regime in the digital consultation. Frankly, government is not particularly good at keeping up with technology—I am talking about government as an overall body, rather than any particular government—so it is right that the market looks at how we can introduce conduct requirements and how we can have pro-competitive interventions by the digital market unit to keep up with an ever-changing regime. We also consulted on a merger regime, which is exactly the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe was talking about—the so-called killer acquisitions and other stifling of innovation. I remember the days of Netscape, Mozilla Firefox and all the other browsers that were available but have now fallen by the wayside—again, tumbleweed from my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher), who is far younger than me.

My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth talked about Cornwall. She did not just talk about regulation and competition regimes and legislation to promote things such as the direct sales of fish and the secondary industries around the exciting opportunities for lithium. Actually, it is about promoting enterprise and innovation. If regulation is there, that is fantastic, but it does not always need to resort back to a constructed regime if there are businesses ready to grab opportunities. That needs to be part of a suite of measures to ensure that the UK is the best place to start, grow and scale up a business. Part of that is the strategy that BEIS is coming up with, to show that we are ready to invest in—and are investing in—and support, for the long term, those kinds of technologies, which will give businesses the confidence to invest in areas such as Truro and Falmouth in order to make the most of that.

Looking at some other areas, the hon. Member for Makerfield talked about weddings. That was an interesting point about the covid pandemic, because I think that shows the difficulty of having a consumer policy. I was the Minister charged with engaging with the wedding sector, and that was a challenge. We had brides and grooms looking forward to their special day, which costs a lot of money. The whole point about the wedding

sector is that it builds up anticipation and expectation. Clearly, however, venues and organisers especially had spent a lot of money and had a lot of reservations, but they have only a single day to provide their service. When they were compelled to lock down, or when demand was stifled, if they had refunded everything in one go, they would have been out of business. The balance was hugely difficult, with a lot of arguments between them and the CMA within that. I am glad that we got through that, largely, and that we were able to navigate through it by working with the CMA and the sector to make progress.

I will conclude on the report of my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare, because I want to give him time to respond. His report represents a significant milestone in the process of reforming competition and consumer policy. I reiterate my thanks for his work. We will continue the conversation as we bring legislation to bear, as we make the changes where primary legislation is required, despite the fact that changes are already happening. He has acknowledged the direct impact of some of his proposals, on which we have consulted, so we will bring that all together. I continue to work with stakeholders—I spoke with them only last week on this very subject—and we are carefully considering the feedback. We will come back with measures in good time.

3.57 pm

John Penrose: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. One thing that has been very clear is that everyone present wants us to go further and faster. Everyone is saying, “Get on with it. Why are we not moving more quickly?” I think it is the only time in my life that I have ever been outflanked on a competition issue by the Labour Front Bencher—I am paraphrasing the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra)—who agreed with a great deal in the report but would like to go further in a few areas. Even without that, the clear message from everyone who spoke is that we agree with most of this and we want it to happen quickly, please, and to go further. Radicalism, not incrementalism, has been the universal message.

My hon. Friend the Minister can take away a reassuring message that, perhaps contrary to what he might have expected, there is cross-party agreement on more competition and more consumer rights, because from that comes a better and more trusting economy, and therefore a more productive and high-wage economy. At the start of the debate, I was not sure that I would get that, but it has been clear that that is where we are. However, we will need to push him a bit, because he did not mention a couple of things in his remarks, such as the stuff about whether we can further reform some of the economically regulated sectors, to normalise as much of them as we can to ensure that we do not need extra protections, because the existing ones will be enough. It looks as if he might not have got to a section of his speech, so it would be lovely if he commits to that when we get to the primary legislation.

The Minister was also clear that there will be primary legislation. I appreciate that he cannot give too many details in advance of the Queen’s Speech. However, it is clear that we cannot have the digital markets unit functioning effectively without primary legislation. Therefore, more progress will be needed. He was very clear about the shortcomings—as he sees them—of the one in, one out mechanism, or the one in, two out mechanism, for better regulation and about the fact that he has a mechanism, he thinks, for an alternative approach that will work, but when I asked him about how, we just got a repetition of what, rather than how, and there was no detail behind it. I am sure that he has that, and I hope that he will come around to describing it in detail in public shortly, because at the moment it is a bit of a mystery. Without it, we will have nothing that works.

That said, I again thank everyone for participating and the Minister for his comments. I think we are making progress. We have an awfully long way still to travel.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered UK competition and consumer policy in response to the Penrose review.

Great British Railways Headquarters: Carnforth Bid

4 pm

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Carnforth's bid to become the headquarters for Great British Railways.

It is a pleasure to introduce this debate under your stewardship, Mr Efford. I have to swap my glasses because, sadly, I am at that age when I need readers. The debate is about Carnforth station becoming the new headquarters for Great British Railways. It is a national competition and I realise from the outset that the Minister cannot say, "Well, it should come to Carnforth." This is a competition and, in that spirit, I want to put on the record why I think it should be Carnforth.

The location and geographical area of Carnforth means it is centrally placed in the UK, connecting north, south, east and west by rail. The community has facilities to host the new headquarters, such as hotels, and direct access to the city of Lancaster and to Morecambe, which is soon to be the home of the prestigious Eden Project. I am involved in developing this application with Carnforth Town Council, Lancaster City Council, Lancashire County Council, which is assisting with information, Carnforth & District chamber of trade, Lancaster Civic Vision, the whole community, cross-party, of the Lancaster district, and the great people of Carnforth and the surrounding area. A special mention must be given to David Morgan and his team at Lancaster Civic Vision for compiling a petition of more than 500 names so far from all over the Lancaster district. As I said, all the political parties endorse this and the campaign has unanimous support on Lancaster City Council. It was confirmed to me this morning that the council will submit a formal bid.

It is delightful to see the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) here, also helping and assisting with this cross-party co-operation in trying to make Carnforth the headquarters of Great British Railways.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I thank my hon. friend and neighbour for giving way. I want to put on the record how the bid by Lancaster City Council is cross-party and unanimous. We both represent parts of the Lancaster City Council district. The leader of that council is a Green party councillor and we have all come together to make a bid for the north of Lancashire. If levelling up is to mean anything, does he agree that we cannot just see bids to Government coming from the big cities; we also need them to come from towns such as Carnforth? If Lancashire were to get it, would it not be a shame if it were to go to Preston, for example, ahead of Carnforth? Does he agree that Carnforth has a much stronger bid in the county than Preston?

David Morris: I totally agree with my hon. friend, in this context and in this Chamber. In short, the whole community in Lancaster and Morecambe, as we have seen, wants to see Carnforth succeed in the bid to become the national headquarters for Great British Railways. I must also pay homage to Councillor Peter Yates MBE for assisting me in writing this speech—what he does not know about railways and especially Carnforth is quite simply not worth knowing.

The projected area for the headquarters could be based near Carnforth railway station or the surrounding buildings, parking and land. There are plenty of sites nearby to build a new office block if needed. The benefits to be gained for local employees are the kudos, connectivity, quality employment and for families to occupy new homes already being constructed, developing more opportunities for young people, school places and excellent local tourism. We are also very well situated for the nearby Lake District and Yorkshire Dales; this will boost our local economy.

Carnforth is also a major crossroads in rail and road—via rail from all directions, north, east, south and west; and via road the M6 motorway has two slip roads, and other roads traverse east to west. The M6 is less than one mile from the rail connections, and I believe it is one of the quickest routes from the M6 motorway to the west coast main line in the country.

We have electric charging points in the surrounding area to promote low-carbon transport. Carnforth is the gateway to the coast, the Dales, the Lakes; it connects the east coast to the west coast by rail and road. It connects via Heysham Port to the Isle of Man and also Ireland. Carnforth has the world-famous tourist attraction, the home of "Brief Encounter", the David Lean film from the 1940s. The Brief Encounter café is a replica, exactly as it was in the film. It is a fantastic experience. Carnforth has extensive rail heritage, with associated listed buildings left over from that criminal era in rail history: the scrapping of steam engines in the short-sighted Beeching era.

In the spirit of levelling up, new high-profile businesses are relocating to Carnforth. Businesses recently relocated—and some established—include Porsche South Lakes, Havwoods International, Strong Doors, Castle Packaging, Abacus Resources, Logs Direct, Rickerby International, LARS Communications, MasterCraft, DPD Logistics, Lake Coast and Dale, Plus Flooring, Barnfield Developments and Thomas Plant. We also have the Keerside and Bridgeside industrial parks. I hope I have not left anybody out; apologies in advance if I have done so. This gives a business snapshot of the opportunities that the Carnforth area has to offer—all recently completed as well.

Carnforth had thought to establish the footprint of levelling up before the term was even thought up, such is the ingenuity and aspiration of the community I have the honour to represent. The new headquarters will be the icing on the cake for Carnforth. Also underway is the construction of 214 new homes and planning for a further 500, as well as a proposal to develop a sports complex. Rail user groups and societies, of which there are many in Carnforth, promote battery electric locomotives to decarbonise our environment. Clean air is paramount in the ethos of our district.

Cat Smith: This is an opportunity for us both, as local MPs, to put on record our thanks to the Lancaster and Morecambe rail users group, which continues to champion rail travel in our area. The hon. Gentleman was making a point about Carnforth being the place where trains went to die. Would it not be so poetic if it was the place where Great British Railways headquarters was relocated?

David Morris: That is a fantastic sentiment, and I will allude to that later in my speech. It is true that we have a lot of railway heritage in Carnforth, and I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention.

As I previously stated, we connect to all cardinal points via rail and road, but we must include connections to the Isle of Man and to Ireland via Heysham port. Carnforth has a direct rail link to Manchester airport. This demonstrates connectivity that is the envy of other applications. We also must not forget the disabled access by ramps, disabled changing facilities, cycle storage and routes, bus connections, and secure car parking. The community of Carnforth have raised £1.4 million for restoration and heritage, work closely with Rail Track, and later worked with Network Rail, creating in excess of 50,000 tourist visits annually. Pre-covid, that was 240,000 rail-ticket travellers using the station. Our unique location is key; all transport modes are catered for.

Many precision, high-tech skills are available in the area. We have universities and technical colleges on our doorstep. To our west, the Barrow submarine manufacturer; to the south, nuclear power with BAE systems. Our workforce is geared up to assist. We have links to the Lakes and Dales, which are a tourist hot spot; links to Manchester airport; and links for country walks, cycle tracks, costal bird sanctuaries, parkland and the great halls of national heritage in the Lune Valley. Carnforth is a quality area linking all of the best of the UK, as well as linking to the planned Eden North Project.

To conclude, Carnforth exists because of the railways. Carnforth is steeped in railway connectivity and heritage, and is known the world over as Steamtown. Carnforth hosts the last complete steam railway depot, which is crying out for new life to be injected into its many listed historic structures. The site is now occupied by West Coast Railways, one of the UK's largest heritage rail operators. The love of rail is in the DNA of Carnforth. Network Rail have depots and offices located close by, showing an established rail expertise, and further personnel and workforces will enhance the community's heritage. As the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood said, this is where the trains came to die, and it is now fitting that this regeneration scheme considers Carnforth as the place where the UK railway of the next century—at least—starts.

4.10 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton): Thank you, Mr Efford. First, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) for securing today's debate. Although it is my first debate on the location of the Great British Railways headquarters, I am very aware that it is the third that has taken place in this Chamber, with previous ones on the merits of Darlington and York. It is really heartening to see hon. Members from up and down the country doing fantastic work supporting the bids of their towns and cities.

Railways are close to my heart. Both of my grandfathers worked on the railways—one in Wensleydale and the other in County Durham—and I found out only recently that my dad was actually born in a railway cottage. I do therefore have an understanding of the importance of the industry, and also of the amazing rail heritage across this country.

As my hon. Friend has set out, Carnforth has a significant rail heritage. At its peak, Carnforth was a meeting point between three major railways, and it grew into an important railway town. My hon. Friend touched

on the film “Brief Encounter.” When the English film director Sir David Lean was looking for a railway station to film the 1945 classic, it was no coincidence that Carnforth station became the backdrop for such a romantic movie. Today, the film is one of many attractions at the Carnforth Station Heritage Centre. In addition, Carnforth is the headquarters of West Coast Railways, which operates several regular steam trains, most notably the Jacobite, giving passengers the opportunity to travel on historic steam locomotives. For that reason alone, I know that Carnforth will continue to have an important role to play in our railways.

My mailbox is great evidence of the fact that there are, of course, many other towns and cities across the country that have played an important part in our proud railway heritage and that hon. Members are very proud to represent. I look forward to seeing the many outstanding applications for the new GBR headquarters that we will receive before the competition closes on 16 March.

Cat Smith: I had not realised the Minister's railway credentials in terms of her parentage—clearly, she was born to do the role that she does today. One of the restrictions that stops some towns bidding for the GBR headquarters is that towns that are not currently connected to the rail network are not eligible. I also represent Fleetwood, which is not on the rail network. It has now been about two years since the residents of Fleetwood were promised that the railway would be brought back to the town; I believe that the Prime Minister visited just ahead of the 2019 general election and promised us that. Can she give us any update on when we might see that?

Wendy Morton: The hon. Lady is right to highlight Fleetwood, but I am sure that she understands that I am not in a position to give her an update today.

As hon. Members will be well aware, the Williams-Shapps plan for rail, which was published in May 2021, set out the path towards a truly passenger-focused railway, underpinned by new contracts that prioritise punctual and reliable services; the rapid delivery of a ticketing revolution, with new flexible and convenient tickets; and long-term proposals to build a modern, greener and accessible network. Central to the Williams-Shapps plan for rail is the establishment of a new rail body, GBR, which will provide a single familiar brand and a strong unified leadership across the network. It is worth noting that GBR will be responsible for delivering better value and flexible fares, and the punctual and reliable services that passengers deserve. Bringing ownership of the infrastructure, fares, timetables and planning of the network under one roof will bring today's fragmented railways under a single point of operational accountability, ensuring the focus is delivering for passengers.

GBR will be a new organisation with a commercial mindset and a strong customer focus. It will also have a different culture to the current infrastructure owner, Network Rail, and very different incentives from the beginning. GBR will have responsibility for the whole railway system, with a lean national headquarters as well as regional divisions. The national headquarters will be based outside London and bring the railway closer to the people and places that it serves, ensuring that skills, jobs and economic benefits are focused beyond the capital in line with the Government's commitment to levelling up.

[Wendy Morton]

The competition was launched by the Secretary of State on 5 February 2022 and the GBR transition team are now welcoming submissions from towns and cities across Great Britain. Prospective local authorities are asked to submit a short expression of interest to the GBR transition team explaining why they are best suited to meet a set of six criteria for the national headquarters. These are: alignment to levelling-up objectives; connected and easy to get to; opportunities for GBR; rail heritage and links to the network; value for money; and public support.

The GBR transition team will then create a shortlist of the most suitable locations, which will go forward to a public consultation vote. Ministers will make a final decision on the headquarters' location based on all the information we have gathered. Applications for the competition close on Wednesday 16 March, and I look forward to receiving lots of applications.

As I previously mentioned, alongside a new national headquarters, GBR will have regional divisions responsible and accountable for the railway in local areas, ensuring decisions about the railways are brought closer to the passengers and communities that they serve. The GBR regional divisions will be organised in line with the regions established in Network Rail's "Putting Passengers First" programme, which reflects how passengers and freight move across the network today. Cities and regions in England will be given greater influence over local ticketing, services and stations through new partnerships between regional divisions and local and regional government. Initial conversations have started with local stakeholders on how those partnerships can best work.

The new GBR HQ that we are talking about today is not the only way that the Government are focused on levelling up the railways. We published the integrated rail plan on 18 November 2021, which is an ambitious strategy setting out £96 billion of investment into the railways of the north and the midlands to be delivered over the next 30 years. The plan sets out how the Government will deliver real and meaningful improvements

to communities in the north and the midlands, and support economic growth by transforming east-west and north-south links.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale and the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) for sharing with me a little more insight into Carnforth and its railway heritage. I look forward to receiving their bids and all the other bids in due course.

In conclusion, the reforms proposed under the Williams-Shapps plan for rail will transform the railways for the better, strengthening and securing them for the next generation. The reforms will make the sector more accountable to taxpayers and Government. They will provide a bold new offer to passengers of punctual and reliable services, simpler tickets and a modern, green and innovative railway that meets the needs of the nation. While transformation on this scale cannot happen overnight, the Government and the sector are committed to ensuring the benefits for passengers are brought forward as quickly as possible. New national flexible season tickets are already on sale and the transition from the emergency recovery measures agreement to new rail contracts is under way.

GBR will be an organisation that works in tandem with the local communities that it serves. It will be designed to have the structure to become yet another example of this Government's historic commitment to levelling up the regions across the nation. The Government and the GBR transition team welcome the interest of Members and their advocacy for their respective cities and towns, and welcome their participation in the competition for GBR's headquarters. Together, we can deliver the change that is required. We look forward to building this new vision for Britain's railways in collaboration with the sector and communities. The launch of the GBR headquarters is one of the many steps that we are taking to achieve that.

Question put and agreed to.

4.20 pm

Sitting suspended.

Breastfeeding: Government Support

4.23 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for breastfeeding.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Efford. I thank all Members present for making it to the debate this afternoon. It feels particularly appropriate that this debate on Government support for breastfeeding is happening on International Women's Day. It is an issue that matters to so many women, and I have had lots of people in touch about it. However, today, as with every day of late, I have thought of the women of Ukraine and their babies; I wonder how they are coping and I hope that they can get to safety soon.

I send my very best wishes to everyone who is feeding their wee one and to those who are proud of meeting their breastfeeding goals. I also send my love and thoughts to those who have struggled and felt let down, and to those who carry those feelings around with them for the rest of their lives. We all know that breastfeeding is natural, but it is certainly not easy.

In this debate, I want to talk about the wider context for supporting breastfeeding, because it does not happen on its own. It takes a range of support, across Government, in employment law, equalities legislation and financial support for the maternity, health visiting, peer support and tongue-tie services that are so necessary. I know that Scotland is not perfect, but we have placed breastfeeding support in our programme for Government and engaged positively in the "Becoming Breastfeeding Friendly" international programme. Our investment is paying off, with the data showing an increase in breastfeeding rates. Almost two thirds—66%—of babies born in Scotland in 2020-21 were breastfed for at least some time after their birth. More than half of babies—55%—were being breastfed at 10 to 14 days of age in 2020-21. That has increased from 44% in 2002-03, so it shows what a difference that investment can make. I was also glad to see in the Scottish data that 21% of toddlers were receiving some form of breastmilk. We know that because Scotland has invested in that data, whereas the English infant feeding study was cancelled some years ago. It needs to be reinstated so that that can be tracked.

I was really glad that the UK Government announced a £50 million investment in breastfeeding, but I would be grateful if the Minister could share some more detail on how exactly that will be spent, and how the spend will be monitored. There are many fears that, although it sounds like an awful lot of money, and in some ways it is, it could be spread too thinly across services across England. We also need to regulate the factors that can dissuade and diminish breastfeeding, such as aggressive marketing of infant formula—a global issue, but one on which the UK Government can play a leading role.

I thank Parliament's digital engagement team for its support in putting out a survey for the debate. It had a whopping 2,618 responses in the very short time that the survey was running, so I thank each and every person who responded for doing so, and for helping to inform the debate. I also thank those who contacted me directly. I hope that I will be able to fit in all the concerns that they raised. Following that social media request,

in response to the question "What policies would have encouraged or supported you, your family or friends in breastfeeding?" respondents came back with a number of remarks and policy suggestions around several key themes. The first was better information and guidance through classes and healthcare professionals. Lauren responded to say:

"Covid meant there were no antenatal classes available, however midwives did not discuss breastfeeding other than asking if I intended to do it. There was no feeding support offered in hospital and no information about what feeding support is available. If literature had been available as to what support is available and how to access this, including infant feeding teams and information around tongue-tie, this would be helpful."

That lack of information, particularly around the time of covid, has been felt by many people who responded to the survey, and indeed people in my own family. It is still going on, with mums from Newham complaining about not being able to be with their babies, and restrictions being unfairly put in place. That continues to this day. Others pointed out the importance of the provision of lactation consultants, with Georgie saying:

"I had access to a lactation consultant because I'm lucky enough to have that privilege but for my friend who did take the ill advice of her midwives, she was misdirected and her breastfeeding journey ended after four weeks."

There are too many whose journeys finish too soon.

Workplace support is also vital to support women on their breastfeeding journey. Katie said:

"Women need to be supported so that when they return to work they have a dedicated space that they can pump and store milk so that they continue to breastfeed."

Billie-Jean said:

"Too many workplaces don't have suitable rooms so women have to choose between returning to work or not working to be able to keep providing breast milk for their children."

Looking more widely at public education, Susannah said:

"Policies within education in schools—lessons around conception/fertility—breastfeeding should be learnt about accurately from a scientific view so children learn its value and importance and it is normalised."

I know that the breastfeeding network in Ayrshire does a huge amount of work to ensure that it gets into schools to tell young people about breastfeeding.

To move to the global context on breastfeeding, the international code of marketing of breastmilk substitutes is 41 this year. It was written in response to the aggressive marketing of infant formula, which is of course to the detriment of breastfeeding. I know that it can be a really sensitive issue, so I would like to be absolutely clear that I believe that formula is an essential item that must be available to those who need it. People using formula deserve to receive impartial support and advice, not marketing and advertising.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing forward this debate. She has certainly been a champion on this issue—that word is used often in this House, but it is applicable to her. Following on from my work with her in the all-party parliamentary group on infant feeding and inequalities, I met a lady called Claire Flynn—a Breastival board member from Belfast—who I think the hon. Lady knows. She said that breastfeeding strategies and plans vary across Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland. Does the hon. Lady agree that there is a real need to

[*Jim Shannon*]

reinstate the infant feeding survey? We understand that work on that is under way at Public Health England. Northern Ireland must be included and funding must be made available to enable that. Through the hon. Lady, I ask the Minister to consider a UK-wide approach.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. For those who missed the start of the debate, and so that people do not miss out on their time—we are tight for time—let me just say that we had planned to give Alison four to five minutes, and she has that now. Then the SNP spokesperson will have three to four minutes, Back Benchers two to three minutes and the Minister 10 minutes. I thought it would be worth intervening with that so that Members could work out the timing of their speeches.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Efford. I am happy to squeeze my speech if my hon. Friend would like to extend hers.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Okay.

Alison Thewliss: Thank you, Mr Efford. I had a conversation with some of the senior Clerks, and I had thought I would be allowed to slightly extend my time if we could get back quickly from the Chamber after the statement.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman's comments about Breastival; it is a wonderful event in Northern Ireland and I have been able to participate in it. I agree very much that we need to have consistency and the infant feeding survey.

The World Health Organisation and UNICEF published a report last month entitled, "How the marketing of formula milk influences our decisions on infant feeding", which found that this \$55 billion industry is still doing all it can to target families and to influence their feeding choices,

"undermining women's confidence and cynically exploiting parents' instinct to do the best for their children".

Their data estimates that scaling up breastfeeding globally could prevent the deaths of 800,000 children under five and 20,000 breast cancer deaths among women every single year, which is quite astonishing.

Exposure to formula milk marketing reaches 84% of all women surveyed in the UK. We all know that this advertising works—that is exactly why companies invest so much money, time and effort in it. It influences which brands we choose and how much we spend. The report states that the evidence is strong that formula milk marketing—not the product itself—disrupts informed decision making and undermines breastfeeding and child health. Those who responded to the survey for this debate agreed. Deborah said:

"The aggressive advertising of infant milks and bottles undermines the giving of human milk at every step. It feeds us doubt of our own bodies."

Stacey said:

"Advertising infant formula basically makes out that breastfeeding should be done for 6 months maximum, then baby should be on 'proper' milk. It is completely untrue and it needs to be better regulated as people just assume a baby will be bottle fed formula and advertising does an excellent job of solidifying this belief."

Much of the marketing in the UK is done through traditional means such as television, but there is also a lot going on in social media, through companies' advertising and influencers, and through online baby clubs run by formula companies, which are a tool to recruit and to market to families, and are a lot harder to monitor. What discussions has the Minister had with her colleagues at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport about whether such marketing should be brought into the scope of the Online Safety Bill? After all, this is about the health and wellbeing of parents and the best start for our youngest citizens.

Alongside investing in comprehensive service provision, the Government should do their bit to advertise breastfeeding. There was a brilliant campaign by the Public Health Agency in Northern Ireland called "Not Sorry Mums". I encourage the Minister to watch it and to see what more her Department can do to protect, promote and support breastfeeding through the means at her disposal. After all, if there can be giant billboards promoting levelling up, there is no reason why there cannot be breastfeeding ones on exactly the same scale. The new mural in Greenock by graffiti artist Smug depicts beautifully a breastfeeding mermaid across a whole gable end. Some have argued that normalising breastfeeding ought to use real women rather than fantastical mermaids, but it is beautiful and we should have a lot more of that.

I repeat that it is crucial to have the service provision there, not just the advertising or the advice; otherwise, we are setting women up to fail. Emma, who responded, said,

"there is a lot of information promoting breastfeeding through the NHS but then very little actual support to help facilitate it. This mixed messaging then causes women to feel like a failure if they are not successful meeting in their breastfeeding goals."

Donor milk has a crucial role to play in supporting babies in neonatal units. I am proud that Scotland has had a national milk bank based in Glasgow for some years now, but the picture is a bit patchier in other parts of the UK. Professor Amy Brown and Dr Natalie Shenker have been researching the impact that milk banks can have on the mental health of women and their families, in offering both reassurance and support for mums until their own milk comes through. I urge the Minister to engage with that research and see what more can be done to develop and support milk banking.

The provision of tongue-tie treatment is also patchy, but it can make all the difference to parents. Siân contacted me to share her experience, the distress she went through and her heartfelt thanks to her fairy godmother Lisa, a specialist breastfeeding support worker who listened to her and got her the support she so desperately needed. Everyone should have access to a Lisa.

I would add that it is also important to recognise the other disparities and inequalities that exist. Those living in deprived communities are less likely to breastfeed—although there is some evidence in Scotland of the difference we are making on that. Those who are new to the UK also encounter barriers coming into a bottle-feeding culture and feel pressured to adopt that culture rather than continuing to breastfeed, as their families would have done before. There are also barriers for those who are HIV-positive, who can receive very variable advice, and barriers put in the way of LGBT couples. Laura-Rose Thorogood of The LGBT Mummies Tribe contacted

me to highlight the lack of support that she and others like her had experienced. I hope the Minister will meet that group, too, to discuss support further.

I could speak about this for much longer, as I am sure you are aware, Mr Efford. I could give numerous examples and testimony to illustrate what more needs to be done. I would like the Minister to agree to look seriously at the funding of all services and at the full implementation of the international code of marketing breastmilk substitutes, as the World Health Organisation and UNICEF have called for. She has the power to make this change to protect, promote and support breastfeeding now and in the future.

4.36 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) on securing this hugely important debate. I hope you can do all you can in the Chair to ensure that we have all the time allocated to this debate that we should have, because we have precious little time on support for breastfeeding, but it is vital to so many people.

I am glad that this issue is getting time in the House, and I completely understand how difficult breastfeeding is, why it is not possible for many women, which is totally understandable, and how often it needs support. The current lack of provision for breastfeeding support and the impact of not restoring services after covid will be the main subject of my speech, and that is what constituents have been contacting me about. I breastfed my four children for a total of five years, so I understand the need for support and also the need to weigh babies frequently and straightaway, alongside breastfeeding, especially at the beginning, which is something else that has been cut. It is heart-wrenching to know that many mothers in my constituency are not getting the support that was easily available for me. Breastfeeding is also intertwined with mental health and can strengthen maternal and infant resilience if it is properly supported.

The Minister knows Wandsworth well, so I am glad to be able to raise the situation there. We saw the near total disintegration of breastfeeding support in the community during covid, and it has not yet returned. Every single health visitor infant feeding team was deployed during the pandemic and every single children's centre closed, so there were no drop-ins for breastfeeding support. Just one person was left across the whole of Wandsworth and the borough of Richmond during the pandemic to support all the mothers and babies there. That is ridiculous, because the need was the same, but the support was massively reduced. Although the voluntary sector stepped up, there is no substitute for good-quality and accessible statutory services. The Government need to provide urgent funding and support for these dwindling services and to find out which are not being reopened. They should do a survey of all the services to find out what was there before covid and what is there now.

One constituent wrote to me about her awful experience so far. She said that, since covid, a lot of breastfeeding clinics providing support to mothers have closed. The only local clinic that she has managed to find is a two-hour clinic on Fridays in Kingston, which is quite far away. Otherwise, there is no provision in Putney and no way of getting a baby weighed other than by going to A&E or asking for a health visitor—something that

is very difficult to get. The Eileen Lecky clinic in Putney was fantastic and used to provide this service, but it has been closed and the building is entirely empty. Before this debate I checked when the clinic would reopen, because I hoped to bring some good news. I found out that it is closed permanently now. No one was told about this; it is absolutely shocking to everyone in the area.

So what do we need? We need proper Government support. I urge the Minister to do everything in her power to restore these NHS services—in-person, easily accessible services at pre-pandemic levels. We need networks of trained peer supporters. That requires a training programme, a co-ordinator, regular supervision and updating under a health professional. We also need a specialist IBCLC—international board certified lactation consultant—clinic for complex cases. It is unacceptable that in 2022 parents are being left on their own and in the dark during one of the most important periods of their lives and their children's lives. The Government can and must do more.

4.40 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you for giving me the chance to speak, Mr Efford. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) on securing the debate and thank her for setting the scene. Some people might think that it is unusual for a man to speak on this issue, but the hon. Lady brought it to my attention some time ago, when she first set up the all-party parliamentary group on infant feeding and inequalities, and since then I have always been very pleased to support her endeavours to highlight these issues and make them more acceptable across society, where sometimes people might have some questions.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central, though the APPG and through the opportunities I have had to help others, was introduced to some of the people from Belfast who work on this. I have attended a number of their events, which I always think is very important, because if there is any taboo about breastfeeding, in public or wherever it may be, I feel that society has to be more sympathetic and understanding. The hon. Lady has done that from the very beginning, and I have been very pleased to support her.

One of my favourite TV programmes is “Call the Midwife”—I don't know about other Members, but I never miss it—and these are the sorts of important issues it tries to address. My wife and I sit down and are engrossed in that programme. It addresses the issue of mothers being unable to breastfeed, for whatever reason, such as the physical or health circumstances that the hon. Member for Glasgow Central referred to, and it does so in a very sympathetic and kindly way. The wonderful thing about “Call the Midwife” is that, more often than not, things always turn out right, and that gives me a wee bit of a lift on a Sunday night—I wish life was like that all the time. I can think of only one exception, but otherwise the stories always end well.

I was contacted by Claire Flynn, a Breastival board member, who I met at a local breastfeeding event in Belfast to highlight some of the issues—I have been to three or four of those events. Looking at breastfeeding support across the UK, there are huge gaps in provision. Scotland and England have made significant investments in breastfeeding support—the hon. Member for Glasgow

[*Jim Shannon*]

Central has driven that, by the way—but unfortunately in Northern Ireland we have not gone so far, although we do have Breastival and other things we have been doing. We have not seen the same investment, despite having further to go.

The covid pandemic has eroded many of the community supports in place and increased new mothers' isolation, so it is important that we reach out and help. Urgent action that recognises that breastfeeding is foundational for lifelong health is needed to rebuild and strengthen protection and support for the crucial early years of a child's life.

As I said in my intervention, there is a real need to reinstate the infant feeding survey—the Minister nodded when I said that, presumably to say that it is a good idea or to confirm that she will answer that question. We understand that work on that is under way with Public Health England. Northern Ireland must be included and funding must be made available to enable that. I ask the Minister to consider a UK-wide approach, if possible, with discussions with the devolved Administrations and the devolved Health Ministers.

The Minister will know the importance of reinstating the infant feeding survey across the UK to provide better estimates on the incidence, prevalence and duration of breastfeeding and other feeding practices adopted by mothers in the first eight to 10 months after their baby is born. We need data and statistics to direct strategy. That is hugely important information for anyone developing policies or researching infant feeding in the UK, and it would provide an update on how policies and the state of the UK are impacting on infant feeding.

I am sad to say that the Western Trust milk bank in County Fermanagh is the only milk bank in Northern Ireland, and indeed the Republic of Ireland does not have its own milk bank at all. Therefore, cross-border, that milk bank has helped hundreds of neonatal babies since 2000. It is vital that the human milk bank in Fermanagh, and milk banks across the UK, are supported. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central has done that actively—verbally and physically.

In Northern Ireland, there have been massive steps to try to normalise breastfeeding, including the Public Health Agency's "Breastfeeding Welcome Here" scheme, as well as the growth of online support groups and Breastival, which is a unique, award-winning festival that aims to support, normalise and celebrate breastfeeding as a part of everyday life in Northern Ireland and across Ireland. I have attended it on numerous occasions to highlight the fact that men need to be involved in this discussion.

We must open our minds, open the conversation and open the coffers, and introduce into this conversation some positivity. My mother informs me—I know nothing about it—that I was breastfed as a child, so I am happy to join this debate.

4.45 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I could talk for hours on this subject, so the length of my speech will be no reflection of how passionately I feel about breastfeeding. Breastfeeding is the best thing for babies and the best thing for mums. It closes the gap and gives babies the best possible chance in life.

I plead with the Minister to reinstate the infant feeding survey; it is incredibly important that we do that. I also echo the views of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) about properly supporting the international code on marketing. There is much more that we can do on that.

It is really important to ensure that all parents, all prospective parents and all people who might be anywhere near a parent or a baby have information on breastfeeding, know that it is normal and natural, and know that breastfeeding is brilliant. It is the very best thing for babies and we must do more to support it and normalise it and to make it clear that it is natural as well as truly excellent.

4.46 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford.

I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) for securing this important debate, which warrants more time and discussion. I agree that, as we participate in this debate, we are thinking about those women in Ukraine who are either giving birth or are about to give birth in the most extraordinary of circumstances and about the difficulty they face in feeding their children. For those of us who have given birth in normal circumstances, that is a truly horrific thought.

We know that the first few months of a child's life are crucial for their later development and that parents need support in their choices for their children. I welcome the Minister's commitment to additional funding for breastfeeding support, but it is clear that the cuts, particularly to Sure Start, were a really bad false economy, with centres having closed, parents lacking support and advice, and children being let down. I was proud to be a governor of a Sure Start early years centre and I know how valuable such centres were.

We have heard that women's isolation during the pandemic was exacerbated because more services were cut. It was horrific to hear the evidence given by my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) that it was only when she rang up that she found out that the centre she mentioned had closed. We already know that there is a shortage of such venues and that we need more of them.

Disadvantaged mothers are more likely to have babies of low birth weight, and low birth weight is associated with raised blood pressure and coronary heart disease, as well as reduced educational attainment, qualifications and employment. Sure Start centres help to level up and supporting them would be a really easy, quick win for the Government to support women in optimal infant nutrition, particularly breastfeeding.

We know how much breastfeeding increases children's chance of a better life. According to analysis from the millennium cohort study, by the age of five breastfed children were already one to six months ahead of those children who were never breastfed.

I was fortunate to have three healthy children. I fed them all myself, with variable results; it was difficult with some of them and not with others—I will not say who, because they might at some point watch this debate, and you can never have favourites. When breastfeeding works, it works well, and when it does not work, it is extraordinarily difficult and stressful.

We also know that those households in the lowest socioeconomic groups have significantly worse health outcomes. We know that women in those households need support and that such support yields results in later life. This is an important debate, particularly on International Women's Day, and I hope that we can have some positive news from the Minister to support women across the country.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): As the Minister knows, we will be suspending the sitting at 4.55 pm, but if she can make a start now perhaps I can give the mover of the motion longer for summing up at the end.

4.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford.

I associate myself with comments on the importance of thinking about the mums and babies in Ukraine at this time, given how difficult it must be for all of them.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) on calling for and securing this debate, particularly today, which is International Women's Day. We often talk about many issues affecting mums, but very rarely do we talk about breastfeeding, so it is really important to have this debate. Ensuring that every baby gets the best start in life is really important. As we have heard, positive experiences during this period will have a significant impact on a child's health and wellbeing, and will inform the course of the rest of their life. Although the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) did not get the chance to speak for long, I sense her passion on this subject and she made her points very well.

Breastfeeding provides significant health benefits for both mother and baby. It has been shown to reduce the prevalence of common diseases in babies, such as respiratory infections and gastroenteritis and the risk of maternal breast cancer, as well as offering protection against childhood and maternal obesity. Breastfeeding also promotes emotional attachment and parental wellbeing. However, as the hon. Member for Glasgow Central said, we need to be mindful of the women for whom it does not work. We must ensure that they get the support and reassurance they need. As the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) said, it can be a very difficult experience for some.

I want to reassure colleagues that the Government are taking this matter extremely seriously. We want to promote breastfeeding as much as possible. The latest available data from the infant feeding survey, which we discussed, shows that only 1% of mothers in England are still exclusively breastfeeding at six months. More than 80% of mothers who stopped breastfeeding in the first two weeks reported that they would have liked to have carried on for longer and that perhaps, with support, they could have done. Common reasons for stopping include a lack of access to support services, as we have heard today, both in the community and at work, while misinformation, inconsistent advice, negative experiences and sometimes even cultural barriers can also deter women.

There are significant disparities in breastfeeding rates across England and the UK. We heard today about some excellent experiences in Scotland and Northern

Ireland. The prevalence of breastfeeding is particularly low among young mothers, those who left education before the age of 18, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. That contributes to a cycle of deprivation and further widens disparities. I agree with the hon. Member for Glasgow Central: it is so important that we teach young girls about breastfeeding in schools, so they learn early on about its importance and what to expect when their time comes.

In light of that, I want to reassure colleagues that the Government are taking action to support breastfeeding and to make that support accessible to everyone who needs it. First, we have the healthy child programme, a national evidence-based programme of interventions to support parenting and healthy choices. It outlines all services that children and families need to receive if they are to achieve optimum health and wellbeing, including breastfeeding and infant support.

Secondly, we have the maternity transformation programme, which seeks to achieve the visions set out by Better Births. National guidelines have been published for midwifery and health visiting services to support breastfeeding. I want to take this opportunity to thank all midwives, health visitors, support workers and those offering peer support. I met March with Midwives just before this debate and I recognise the pressures those workers are under. Sometimes things such as breastfeeding support are reduced or taken away when there is pressure on the service overall. I recognise that, and I am very happy to work with the service to try to improve that.

Thirdly, we have the 2019 NHS long-term plan, which recognises the importance of improving breastfeeding support and sets out a commitment to ensuring that all maternity services have an accredited, evidence-based infant feeding programme by 2024. However, we need the staff and the resources to make that happen. I have heard that loud and clear. We also encourage parents to access support through the Better Health Start for Life campaign, which provides advice and information on breastfeeding.

However, for me the most exciting development is the Government's vision for the best start for life programme. It is only in England, but I am very happy to work with colleagues in the devolved nations to share best practice. The programme will roll out support to the areas of the country that absolutely need the most help. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) for her inspirational work in this field.

The early years healthy development review has taken the Government's commitment to improving breastfeeding rates and improving the support to be included as part of the universal offer for all parents and carers, which will include practical support with breastfeeding, early diagnosis of issues such as tongue-tie and help with formula feeding, which is more appropriate in some cases. The review heard repeatedly from parents about the positive impact breastfeeding can have on their confidence and self-esteem, as well as the value of breastfeeding support groups and peer networks.

In the spending review, the Chancellor announced a £300 million investment to transform family hubs and improve Start for Life services with £50 million for breastfeeding support services. Funding will be made available initially to 75 upper-tier local authorities where we feel the most disparities exist. We will be announcing

[*Maria Caulfield*]

very soon where those 75 authorities will be and where we can support breastfeeding in those communities. Those local authorities will be able to invest in increasing the range of breastfeeding advice, specialist and peer support, and out-of-hours support that is available in person, on the phone and digitally, creating breastfeeding-friendly environments that will help mothers meet their breastfeeding goals.

Fleur Anderson: I know that time is pressing; I thank the Minister for giving way. Has the Minister done any assessment of how many clinics there were pre-covid? That number of 75 local authorities is great, but what about everywhere else? Has there been an assessment of initial services, what has been cut and what has been reinstated?

Maria Caulfield: I do not have that information, but I was interested to hear about the experience in Putney. I will take that away because I spoke to midwives who were redirected during covid, but I am not aware of which services have and have not restarted. I am keen to look at that, so I will follow that up. I am happy to conclude, Mr Efford, if that would be helpful.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): The message we are receiving is that the Chamber has been suspended. I was going to suspend the sitting at 4.57 pm, but if the Minister has finished, we can suspend now and come back after.

Maria Caulfield: I will just conclude by thanking everyone. There remains a huge amount to be done. I very much take on board the points that have been raised in the debate, and I will follow up with colleagues because we need to put breastfeeding higher up the agenda.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): I am suspending the sitting for 15 minutes, but we will start as soon as people are back in their places.

4.56 pm

Sitting suspended.

5.21 pm

On resuming—

Alison Thewliss: I thank everybody who came along this afternoon. Obviously we were interrupted, for understandable reasons, and our thoughts go out to President Zelensky and the people of Ukraine. We hope that some resolution can be found.

I thank the hon. Members for Putney (Fleur Anderson) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for coming along. I also thank the Minister and the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) for their thoughts on this issue. I listened to what the hon. Member for Putney said about services just disappearing and not going back to their pre-covid levels, but even some of the pre-covid levels of services were not great to begin with. There needs to be greater focus and a greater understanding by the Government, so that the funding can follow exactly what is required on the ground.

I was glad to hear from the Minister about the things that she intends to deliver, such as the roll-out of the £50 million to different communities. I look forward to hearing more about that, and I invite her and all Members to come to the all-party parliamentary group on infant feeding and inequalities, which I chair, because its members would like to hear a lot about the money being rolled out and how that service provision will happen. There is a lot to be said for that support, because for women who are facing these challenges, it is not a “nice to have” but an essential service. You cannot get by without somebody there to help you and show you how breastfeeding is done while you have a screaming baby in your arms who is just not feeding. You need to have services there that can support you and wrap their arms around you. Apps and such things are all fine and well, but having actual people to speak to and sit next to at any hour of the day is really important. I thank the people staffing the breastfeeding helpline, which is a service provided by peer supporters on an absolute shoestring. The Government should fund that in order to expand its excellent service.

There is an opportunity here to take the findings of the World Health Organisation and UNICEF report, and for the Minister to have a roundtable discussion with all the experts in this field—there are many—to see what more the UK can do and how we can move forward to make sure that everybody, whatever their feeding choices are, feels supported and that breastfeeding is protected and promoted within the whole of the United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for breastfeeding.

5.24 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 8 March 2022

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Healthcare Reform

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): I wish to update the House on my vision on health reform, “Our Health System: the Government’s reform agenda”. In today’s address, I outlined our intention to take bold action on healthcare reform, setting out our agenda for transforming the healthcare system. This agenda addresses the enduring issues facing the system, and recognises the challenges and opportunities arising from the pandemic—building on our recent elective recovery plan and the publication of the integration White Paper.

The NHS has many strengths and is rightly regarded as a national treasure. However, it faces long-term challenges, including an ageing population and people increasingly living with multiple long-term conditions. All of these have been exacerbated by the covid-19 pandemic, which has added extra pressure on the system, highlighted existing issues, and created new challenges.

At this critical moment, we must now seize the opportunity to put our healthcare system on a more sustainable path for the future while meeting the immediate recovery challenge we face as we emerge from the pandemic.

The Health and Care Bill will, subject to Parliament, create the structures for the future, but we need to consider how we will work within those structures. I recognise waiting time recovery is a significant challenge. However, this is not a reason to back away from those changes, but to double down and ensure we deliver the full benefits.

In the face of growing demand, we will focus on taking a more prevention-centred approach to healthcare, where the emphasis is on preventing needs from arising in the first place—prevention; putting people in control of their own care—personalisation; and driving up the quality of care by working smarter—performance.

As we do this, we must build on existing progress and work with the brilliant individuals and teams in our healthcare system who are already making change happen on a daily basis—which will include continuing to invest in the workforce.

We will build on the announcements made during my speech and set out wider Government policy in this area in due course.

[HCWS666]

Departmental Minute: Liability

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is normal practice, when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the

Minister concerned to present a departmental minute to Parliament giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the minute, except in cases of special urgency.

I have today laid a departmental minute proposing the provision by the NHS Trust Development Authority (TDA), now part of NHS Improvement, of an indemnity that is necessary in respect of an NHS Improvement non-statutory independent review of maternity services at Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust. This review follows a number of serious clinical incidents, beginning with a newborn baby who sadly died in 2009; an incident which was not managed, investigated or acknowledged appropriately by the trust at the time. In subsequent years from 2009 until 2014 a number of further investigations and reviews (internal and external) were also undertaken to confirm whether appropriate investigations were conducted and the assurance processes relating to investigations in the maternity service were adequate. Following the original launch of the review, more families came forward with concerns about their care and this led to an extension to the scope of the original independent review.

The review published its first interim report on 10 December 2020. The report outlined the local actions for learning for the trust and immediate and essential actions for the trust and wider system that are required to be implemented now to improve safety in maternity services for the trust and across England. In response, NHS England and NHS Improvement committed to investing £95 million for workforce numbers, training and development programmes to support culture and leadership, and strengthening board assurance and surveillance to identify issues earlier.

The review’s second and final report is now planned to be published soon.

NHS Improvement are able to obtain indemnity cover from NHS Resolution through the liabilities to third parties scheme (LTPS). The scheme applies to any liability which a member of the scheme owes to any third party in respect of loss, damage or injury arising out of an act or omission in the course of the carrying out of any relevant function of that member which is a qualifying liability.

The indemnity will cover any sums (including any legal or other associated costs) that members of the review team are liable to pay in relation to legal action brought against them by a third party in respect of liabilities arising from any act done, or omission made, honestly and in good faith, when carrying out activities for the purposes of the review. The indemnity will apply to any work carried out from the commencement of the review to its completion in 2022, in accordance with the review terms of reference. The indemnity will cover the contingent liability of any legal action following the publication of the review report and for two years after that date.

The liability of the scheme for any proceedings brought against the member by virtue of Section 13 of the Data Protection Act 1998 for all compensation payable to any claimant or any number of claimants in respect of or arising out of any one event or series of events consequent on or attributable to one source or original cause shall not exceed £50,000. Further, the maximum

sum payable for such cases in any one membership year shall not exceed £500,000. However, in view of the potentially substantial Information Commissioner Office (ICO) fines for data breach, it would be prudent for the £50,000 cover available under the NHS Resolution LTPS scheme to be “topped up” with a specific NHSI indemnity to £1 million. If the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

The Treasury has approved the proposal in principle. If, during the period of 14 parliamentary sitting days beginning on the date on which this minute was laid before Parliament, a Member signifies an objection by giving notice of a parliamentary question or by otherwise raising the matter in Parliament, final approval to proceed with incurring the liability will be withheld pending an examination of the objection.

[HCWS665]

Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 8 March 2022

WORK AND PENSIONS

Household Support Fund

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on the Household Support Fund on 1 March 2022.

David Rutley: 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.

[Official Report, 1 March 2022, Vol. 709, c. 333 WH.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley):

An error has been identified in my contribution to the debate.

The correct contribution should have been:

David Rutley: 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 **February 2022**.

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

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**not later than
Tuesday 15 March 2022**

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