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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 10 March 2022

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Air Pollution

1. **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Whether his Department plans to monitor levels of toxic air pollution around schools. [905982]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jo Churchill): Air pollution is at a record low. However, we need to do more to protect the vulnerable, in particular, and drive cleaner air for all. Last year, more than £1 million was awarded to local authorities under the Department's air quality grant for projects specifically aimed at children. Yesterday, we announced more than £11 million-worth of grants, across 40 local authorities, to improve air quality; several of these projects were focused on schools and their monitoring.

Geraint Davies: Vortex, a company in Swansea bay, manufactures high-quality, low-cost digital monitors—it has 500 across Hammersmith—which help to deliver local air quality schemes, with public support. Given that half a million children in schools are suffering from toxic levels of air pollution, will the Minister undertake to provide monitors across the country, to drive public opinion and better air quality, in accordance with World Health Organisation standards?

Jo Churchill: The hon. Gentleman is a very assiduous campaigner on this topic. Local authorities can choose to monitor outside schools, but it is often better to target resources at improving air quality generally. As I say, we gave £11.6 million yesterday, of which more than £1 million was also for education, following the coroner's report on Ella Kissi-Debrah. I would, of course, be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the issue further.

Biodiversity

2. **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support biodiversity and rewilding in local urban communities. [905983]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): The Government have a world-leading target to halt nature's decline by 2030, and recovering urban biodiversity is an important part of that work. Through our local nature recovery strategies, we will identify local priorities for nature recovery, including of course in urban areas, such as creating, connecting and restoring habitat to form part of our nature recovery network. We are investing £750 million through the nature for climate fund, and I urge my hon. Friend to look at the range of funding we have available, including the local authority treescape fund and the urban tree challenge fund.

Damien Moore: Local urban communities such as Southport benefit enormously from trees, shrubbery and other green spaces that promote biodiversity and rewilding, but there are strong concerns among my constituents that Sefton Council is planning to cut back the greenery along Southport's pavements and replace it with concrete blocks for cycle lanes. So will my hon. Friend support my attempts to fight this nature crime—a potential tree massacre—by Labour-controlled Sefton Council?

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend is a great advocate for this, as Members can tell, and he has regularly bent my ear about the green spaces in his constituency. Through our Environment Act 2021, we have a strengthened duty on local authorities to assess what they can do to further conservation and biodiversity, and we have placed a duty on designated authorities to produce these local nature recovery strategies. We also have that world-leading target to halt the decline in nature. So I urge him to work with the council and get it to do more, but it could replace those concrete blocks with hedges. The air pollution Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), would be grateful for that, as there are some views that that would help to tackle air pollution as well.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): How biodiversity and renaturing is undertaken in the UK will be guided by the convention on biological diversity. Biodiversity has experienced a catastrophic collapse globally. The United Nations biodiversity COP15 is shortly to resume. What are the Government's strategic goals at COP15? What equivalent headline target is there to the net zero target at COP26, which is well understood in local urban communities and across the UK?

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that and for his shared interest in biodiversity. He is right: we must not just do this at home—we have to deal with it abroad as well. Biodiversity loss is a global problem and the forthcoming COP15 on the convention on biological diversity will be really important in furthering our work to bend the curve on the loss of biodiversity. That was agreed at the G7, and the aim of the CBD is to get as many as countries as possible to sign up to that.

Extended Producer Responsibility

3. **Richard Fuller** (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): What progress his Department has made on introducing extended producer responsibility. [905984]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jo Churchill): The Government consulted on the introduction of extended producer responsibility for packaging last year, and the response will be published shortly. We will then consult on reforms to extend schemes to batteries and waste electronic and electrical equipment this year, and to end-of-life vehicles in 2023. I am keen for industries to step up and come forward with schemes themselves, just as the paint-manufacturing industry has done. My door is always open to ways to drive EPR forward.

Richard Fuller: I commend the Minister for moving forward with the extended producer responsibility scheme, which has the potential to significantly increase recycling rates for a number of products, but she will be aware of the potential impact on household budgets. She has opened the door to speak to industry; will she also listen to industry about the pace of change, so that we can get it right at an affordable cost?

Jo Churchill: Many of the companies local to my hon. Friend have articulated their concerns and worries—indeed, during a trip to Viridor last week to look at polymer recycling, I spoke to Unilever, which I believe has a plant local to him. The forthcoming response to the EPR consultation will show businesses that we are listening and working with them. Our initial analysis indicates that EPR will not result in a significant uplift to prices, but we will keep things under review and I am happy to talk to my hon. Friend further.

UK-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement

4. Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If he will hold discussions with the Secretary of State for International Trade on the potential effect on farmers and crofters in the highlands and islands of the UK-New Zealand free trade agreement. [R] [905985]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Over the past 18 months, I have held regular discussions with both the current Secretary of State for International Trade, my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), and her predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), regarding the negotiating mandate for the free trade agreement with New Zealand, which includes protections for British agriculture. Tariff liberalisation for sensitive goods, including beef and lamb, will be staged over time.

Mr Carmichael: The Secretary of State's decision to seek advice from the Trade and Agriculture Commission is welcome, but the questions on which he seeks advice all seem to revolve around standards. Important though standards are, they are not the full story as far as the crofters and farmers in my constituency are concerned. Will the Secretary of State encourage his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade to take a more farmer and crofter-focused approach? This week the Government's own figures indicated that that trade deal risks taking £150 million out of British agriculture.

George Eustice: It is important to recognise that New Zealand has always had access to the UK market under an existing World Trade Organisation schedule of around 114,000 tonnes, but in recent years New Zealand has used only half its quota, because long before the quota is filled it is unable to compete with the great UK producers, including those in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Livestock Farmers

5. Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): What steps he is taking to support livestock farmers. [905989]

The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis): Livestock production is important for food production, the capture of carbon in pasture and the preservation of some of our most iconic landscapes. Our new policies—including the new animal health and welfare pathway and the newly increased farming investment fund—will support livestock farmers.

Jane Hunt: What progress has my hon. Friend made on examining the Welsh compensation scheme for cattle destroyed because of suspected tuberculosis? I understand that the Welsh model pays the value of the animal that is destroyed. What plans does she have to replace the standardised valuations in England, particularly in respect of prize-winning high-quality breeds?

Victoria Prentis: The Welsh Government intend to move away from their current practice of individual animal valuation. They are considering and have recently consulted on moving to a practice of table valuation, such as we use in England. I understand that my hon. Friend recently met the Secretary of State, with her constituent Andrew Birkle, to discuss this important issue.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Most livestock farmers want to follow the best animal welfare standards, and consumers need to have confidence in that. I do not know whether the Minister saw the recent "Panorama" episode, "A Cow's Life", but it shows yet another Red Tractor farm that is not meeting those standards. What is she doing to ensure better consumer confidence and to make sure that livestock farmers live up to the standards that they profess to adopt?

Victoria Prentis: The hon. Lady is a great campaigner for animal welfare and she and I have discussed these issues many times previously. She is right to raise the important issue of animal welfare again and I would be delighted to talk to her about our recently published animal health and welfare pathway. An annual vet visit to every farm and direct discussion between the vet and the farmer will really help at a granular and practical level to bring about the increases in animal welfare that we all want.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): As with the pandemic, the dreadful situation in Ukraine has brought food security into sharp relief. Currently, the pig sector in the UK is still in crisis, with thousands of animals dammed back on farms and more than 40,000, sadly, having been culled on farms and not going into the food supply chain, creating huge health and welfare issues. I know that the Government have

put measures in place and that the Minister is chairing summits, but can she update the House on what the Government are doing to avert this human and animal welfare crisis?

Victoria Prentis: It is fair to say that the dreadful situation in Ukraine means that food security in the broader sense is uppermost in all our minds. We must feel very fortunate in this country that we grow almost all our own grain and are able to be so self-sufficient—74% self-sufficient in the food that we grow. That is not to say that we should be complacent. The Government are working very closely with industry at all levels, with processors and retailers, and not just in the pig sector.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): The £150 million impediment to livestock farmers as a consequence of the New Zealand trade deal is a direct consequence of Brexit, as are the lack of Northern Irish animals at Stirling bull sales; the lack of an ability to export seed potatoes to Northern Ireland and the EU; the tariffs on jute sacks for seed potatoes; and the nightmare of exporting shellfish. These are direct consequences of Brexit. Can the Minister give my Angus farmers just one single benefit of Brexit and make sure that it is not some nebulous opportunity that has not been realised?

Victoria Prentis: I wish—and I am sure that some of the hon. Gentlemen's farmers wish—that the Scottish Government were going with the real benefits that we are able to make as a result of Brexit in the agricultural space. In England, we will be able to move towards a system of paying people for producing public goods. In Scotland, that option is not yet available to farmers. I will be meeting NFU Scotland later today to discuss further issues to do with Scottish farming.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I note that the Minister did not address the question about the pig crisis. Pig farmers have been in crisis month after month after month, and, frankly, the Government's response has always been too little and too late. As was said, more than 40,000 pigs already culled on farms have been completely wasted. It is becoming apparent that one problem is the failure of the processors to honour the contracts to farmers. How much more suffering has to be endured before the Minister does as she has hinted that she might do and passes this to the Competition and Markets Authority, so that we can find out what has been going wrong in what increasingly looks like a broken market?

Victoria Prentis: Only time constraints prevented me from setting out in full what we are doing with the pig industry. We have been careful to work with the pig industry in lockstep at all stages and have brought into play actual schemes that are helping them today. I agree that the supply chain in pigs is in trouble. I have said that frequently, and I have started a review of that supply chain—a serious and systematic review—which may well result in regulatory change. In the collection of the evidence, we will certainly refer matters to the Competition and Markets Authority at the appropriate time, when we have the right evidence. In the interim, I would be most grateful if any pig farmer or producer sent me a copy of a contract, which has been very, very hard to find, as I would very much like to see that.

Food Prices

6. Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): What recent assessment his Department has made of the impact of food price rises on household budgets. [905992]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): International commodity prices are heavily influenced by factors such as energy costs and exchange rates. Recent pressures have been sustained and we have seen food price inflation rise to 4.4% in January, up from 4.2% in December. Events in Ukraine and the effect of that on energy prices are likely to have further impacts, which we are monitoring closely. Our UK food security report, published in December, included analysis of food security at household level.

Kate Osborne: The cost of living is rocketing and the price of food has risen by 3.9% year on year. Food banks such as Hebburn Helps and Bede's Helping Hands in my constituency tell me that they are as busy as ever, as more and more people are being driven into poverty, having to choose between eating and heating. Does the Minister agree that the time has now come for the Chancellor to commit to ending food poverty in the UK by including in his forthcoming spring statement all the measures set out in the "Right to Food" campaign of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) to achieve the permanent eradication of hunger in the UK?

George Eustice: The hon. Lady will be aware that the Government have put in place a number of measures to help households, particularly with the sharp increase in energy costs that they face. The Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy have set those out previously. In addition, we have other schemes such as the holiday activity programme to support those suffering from food insecurity and additional food costs, and we have given local authorities additional measures to help them with those struggling to afford food.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): With Putin's murderous regime wreaking havoc on Ukraine and murdering innocent women and children, there is a direct impact on food and grain prices. Ukraine has stopped exports, as have many other countries. What will the Secretary of State do to protect grain supplies in this country? Secondly, what talks will he have with the retailers to ensure that we can share some of the pain of the costs, which pig and poultry just cannot stand? Thirdly, how are we going to create greater food security and grow more grain in this country, which we are in need of?

George Eustice: On my hon. Friend's final point, we published a highly comprehensive analysis of our food security, including a focus on the production to supply ratio, which showed that we produce roughly three quarters of the food that we are able to grow and consume here. On his specific point, we were aware of the risk of these events in Ukraine and set up a dedicated group within DEFRA at the beginning of January to do contingency planning for the possible impacts on food. We do not import wheat from Ukraine, or only very small quantities; we are largely self-sufficient in

wheat and we import the balance from Canada. However, we are looking at the cost of inputs, particularly for the livestock sector, such as poultry.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The Secretary of State will be aware of widespread concern that the rising cost of fertiliser will add further inflationary pressures to the price of food. Indeed, I have been told by one farmer of a quote for £930 a tonne plus VAT for a shipment that last year cost about £280. What steps can the Government take to address this crisis and ensure that our food security is not undermined?

George Eustice: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Fertiliser prices had spiked even before current events in Ukraine, because the cost of ammonium nitrate is heavily dependent on the cost of gas, as he knows. We have been working closely with our own domestic producer in the UK to ensure that it maintains production. Most farms will now have purchased their fertiliser and have it on farm for the current growing season or the beginning of it, but we are setting up a special group with industry to work on this challenge and to identify better long-term solutions that rely less on the price of gas.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Price rises are having an adverse effect on the household budgets of people across my constituency, perhaps none more so than those people who are off the gas grid and must buy heating oil or gas in bulk. They are not protected by the Government's energy cap. Can my right hon. Friend tell me what he is doing and what work he is doing with BEIS and the Treasury to help to protect my constituents from bills that may have more than doubled?

George Eustice: I have had conversations with the Business Secretary on this matter. The disruptions we are seeing, particularly following events in Ukraine, are having some impact on the supply of household heating oil for those who are not on the grid. I know he is well aware of these issues and his Department is working closely on it.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Russia's appalling invasion of Ukraine clearly drastically affects Ukraine's ability to produce grain and many other foodstuffs, threatening not only price increases, but global famine and disease spread. Domestically, our farmers are experiencing increased seed, fertiliser and transport costs, and the UK, lacking the leverage it once had as part of the EU, is now a small player on the global market. The Secretary of State mentioned a food security review and summits. Exactly what actions is his Department taking to ensure food security in the UK and stabilise food prices, and what plans are the Government making to assist developing countries to meet their needs?

George Eustice: Tomorrow, I will attend a special session of the G7 where, with other like-minded countries, we will discuss some of those issues and the impact on international commodity prices. It is inevitable that when a country such as Russia under Putin takes such steps, there will be some turbulence in the market. It is essential that the world community shows solidarity in taking tough action on sanctions, which we will do. It is

inevitable that there will be some collateral damage to our own interests and prices, but nevertheless we must see that through and impose those sanctions where they are needed in order to bring the regime to its senses.

Coastal Communities

7. **Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): What steps he is taking to support coastal communities. [905994]

10. **Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con): What steps he is taking to support coastal communities. [905997]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Coastal communities are key to our levelling-up agenda, supported by the UK shared prosperity fund, the coastal communities fund and the £100 million UK seafood fund. Up to 2027 we are investing a record £5.2 billion in coastal erosion risk management. That will be invested in about 2,000 schemes and approximately 17% of it is expected to better protect against coastal and tidal flooding. It includes a £140 million coastal project on defences at the Eastbourne and Pevensey coast. We are putting coastal communities right at the heart of this flood protection landscape.

Anna Firth: I welcome my hon. Friend's comments. In Southend, we are blessed with a wonderful coastline, and I am sure she agrees that the best support coastal communities can have is a healthy marine environment allowing our fish and marine life to flourish, thus supporting Southend West's fishing industry. I would therefore be very grateful to know what is being done to monitor and improve the water quality around the English coast, particularly regarding the reduction of heavy metals, sewage and other pollution, especially around the north Thames coast adjacent to Southend West.

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for that question and welcome her to her seat. How wonderful that she has chosen DEFRA orals to ask her first question. That is very fitting, because I think the wonderful Sir David Amess never missed DEFRA questions. She is going to be a great spokesman for her area on this front. She makes a good case for the importance of keeping our waters healthy. In terms of fishing, an inshore survey programme of the outer Thames and the south coast is under way so that we can get data on the fishing stocks to better inform and help our fishermen. A recent survey showed that, remarkably, the Thames estuary, having been declared virtually dead not very long ago, has made a fantastic ecological recovery to the point that we can now see seahorses, eels and seals there.

Caroline Ansell: Who knew we had seahorses off the coast of Eastbourne? This is my perfect moment. I thank my hon. Friend for her answer on the excellent work that is being done on water quality—that is clearly of massive significance to me—and on the coastal defence scheme; Eastbourne is set to potentially receive £100 million to protect the town for 100 years. But my question is about sewage and waste treatment. The sea, and all it affords, is our greatest visitor asset in Eastbourne and highly valued by local people. I recently met my local swimmers—a very hardy crew that includes one cross-channel swimmer. They are concerned about waste treatment because they so enjoy their swimming. What

reassurance can my hon. Friend give them about the new powers in the Environment Act 2021 that will address this, but equally about Government-sponsored local action that will improve storm overflows and surface water, and help to take us from “good” to “excellent” status for our bathing water?

Rebecca Pow: I am tempted to ask whether my hon. Friend joined the swimmers with her bathing costume on. I thank her for her work in campaigning on this matter, which she constantly talks about with me. I am delighted that we recently confirmed funding for East Sussex County Council’s Blue Heart project, which she was very proactive about, to help to reach “excellent” bathing water status. That very much focuses on what to do about the surface water and how to separate it from the sewage. That fits fully with all the work we are doing, as a Government, to make a game-changing difference on improving our water quality.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In the past, central Government have helped the Northern Ireland Assembly to address some of those issues, through finance but also through physical help. Has consideration been given to undertaking a UK-wide survey of coastal erosion with a view to taking a UK-wide approach and reinforcing coastal roads and homes on those roads that are unable to withstand these storms, which appear to happen more regularly than ever?

Rebecca Pow: We take coastal erosion extremely seriously, which is why 17% of our flood protection budget is going to be devoted to coastal areas and coastal erosion. We work very closely in advising and liaising with the devolveds, which we are always happy to do. We are updating our shoreline management plans, which will help inform us, and we are happy to share information with our colleagues in the devolveds.

Water Quality

8. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to improve water quality. [905995]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): We are the first Government to set out our expectation that water companies must reduce storm sewage overflows, and our Environment Act includes a raft of powers to support that expectation. We have almost doubled the funding available for our catchment farming advisers and have taken action to ban microbeads and microplastics in personal care products. We are currently seeking views on further actions we could take in relation to wet wipes, and will shortly be setting targets under the Environment Act to further improve water quality and drive action in the coming years.

Mr Sheerman: The Secretary of State and his team are a very nice bunch of people, and we have heard a lot of warm words this morning, but what my constituents want is action on clean water. My constituents want clean air and clean water. I spoke to Thames Water yesterday. Leading academics from the University of Reading tell us that the cuts to the Environment Agency mean that the agency is no longer measuring how much

pollution is in our rivers. That is a shameful fact. Not one river in our country is safe to swim in—that is the truth. What is the Minister going to do about it?

Rebecca Pow: Action is happening on this side of the House, and if the hon. Gentleman followed it, he would know exactly how much we are doing. Through our Environment Act, we have taken a game-changing move to cut down on the harm caused by storm sewage overflows. Your party, in fairness, never did any of these things. I have inherited—.

Mr Speaker: Order. We have had enough now. I think 12 years is too long ago in history.

Topical Questions

T1. [906000] **Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The harrowing events following the invasion of Ukraine have touched us all. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has received inquiries from many farmers, food producers and water companies that want to offer help to the people of Ukraine. We are co-ordinating with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and aid agencies to ensure we target those offers through the right channels.

There has also been some turbulence in international commodity markets, with agricultural commodity prices strongly correlated to the price of energy. My Department established a dedicated team to plan contingencies for this eventuality early in January. While the UK is largely self-sufficient in wheat and imports some, predominantly from Canada, we do import certain vegetable oils from Ukraine. Tomorrow, I will attend a special meeting of the G7 to discuss these issues further.

Jonathan Edwards: The amount of meat imported to the UK as a result of the trade deals with New Zealand and Australia will vary considerably, depending on whether it is in carcass form or deboned. Are there any nuances in those trade deals stipulating that the meat coming in should be in carcass form, which will not only limit the amount of meat imported but ensure that the added value of the produce is obtained here?

George Eustice: There is a convention in the sheep meat sector that these international agreements are based on something called the carcass-weight equivalent. That does not always apply to beef. However, the special agricultural safeguard that operates from years 10 to 15 will be based on a carcass-weight equivalent mechanism.

T3. [906003] **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): My hon. Friend the Minister knows how important the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill is for animal sanctuaries. Could she update the House on the progress of that Bill and its timeline in this Session?

The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis): The Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill was introduced in June and completed Committee stage in November. We continue to work on the Bill, and have added a new pet abduction offence and extended the

primates measures to Wales. We have also consulted on puppy smuggling. Work continues and I will keep my hon. Friend posted.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): It has been two weeks since I submitted this parliamentary question. Russia and Ukraine account for 29% of global wheat exports and are significant in fertiliser supply. Cereal, bread and pasta are household staples for millions of homes across this country. Even before the war in Ukraine began, we were in the midst of a supply chain and cost of living crisis, with gaps on the shelves and food left rotting in the fields. Labour has a plan to buy, make and sell more of our great British produce, but what is the Secretary of State's plan to address our weakening food security?

George Eustice: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we are working on a food strategy that will address all these issues across the food supply chain and some of the other challenges around the food industry, too. On his specific question, as I have said, we are largely self-sufficient in wheat production. We import some wheat from Canada. Most of our bread manufacturers therefore have British or Canadian wheat in their bread. We have modelled the impact of the increase in commodity prices on the price of a loaf of bread, and because wheat only represents about 10% of the cost of a loaf of bread, the impact is actually quite modest. A much bigger impact is likely to be the increase in fuel costs, since the cost of delivering bread is the biggest cost they face.

Jim McMahon: Many food banks have raised concerns that they may face having to turn away hard-working families struggling to get by. Some have reported that donations are down as families feel the cost of living squeeze, but demand for services is rocketing. It cannot be left to charities and retailers such as the Co-operative and others to fight this alone. What will the Government do to step up and deliver food justice, especially given that this cost of living crisis originated in Downing Street?

George Eustice: The big drivers of household financial insecurity are energy costs, housing costs and so on, and that is why the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy have already announced schemes to try to help households with the cost of energy. When it comes specifically to food, we have a household support fund worth around £500 million, and at a DEFRA level we support projects such as FareShare.

T5. [906005] **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): Breathing clean air is an essential ingredient in living a long and healthy life. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that residents, particularly in our urban areas, are breathing as clear air as possible? What support are the Government offering local authorities to tackle air quality?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jo Churchill): I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. It is a basic right to have clean air. That is why yesterday we announced more than £11 million in grants across local authority projects to improve air quality. We have made £880 million in funding available to support local authorities to tackle

their nitrogen oxide exceedances and to get compliance. That is on top of the £2 billion investment in cycling and walking and a further £4 billion for making the switch to cleaner vehicles, showing a cross-Government approach. The Environment Act 2021 ensured that local authorities have the powers necessary to tackle this issue.

T2. [906002] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I know that as an animal lover, Mr Speaker, you are one of the seven in 10 who think that breeding mammals just for the fur on their backs to end up on a coat is immoral, and the figure is even higher for those against force-feeding ducks and geese for foie gras, so why are the Government even entertaining the idea of lifting the proposed ban on these completely unnecessary so-called luxuries? Can they be true to their Brexit opportunities and put that rumour to bed?

Jo Churchill: We are considering the evidence to inform potential action as far as fur goes and we are being guided by the evidence. We will come forward with further information in due course.

Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): According to Southern Water's own figures, between 27 December 2021 and 6 January 2022, for 236 hours untreated wastewater was discharged from the Lidsey sewage treatment plant into the Lidsey Rife en route to the sea. That is 24 hours a day for 10 consecutive days. The final draft of "The government's strategic priorities for Ofwat" states that the Government expect water companies to

"significantly reduce the frequency and volume of sewage discharges from storm overflows."

Can the Minister confirm—

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman has been here a very long time. In topicals, you cannot just ask the question that was missed out previously. You have to shorten the question so it is short and punchy. Otherwise, nobody is going to get in.

Rebecca Pow: Ofwat is legally required to act in accordance with the policy statement that my right hon. Friend referred to, and the Government expect Ofwat to take serious action against water companies. He might be aware that Ofwat called in five water companies just yesterday to look at what they are doing and their data, and our new system will tackle the issue.

T4. [906004] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Residents of Newcastle's west end are sick and tired of wading through litter. Despite swingeing cuts to Newcastle City Council's budget, it found extra money for street cleaning, but council tax payers should not bear the whole burden. The producers of litter should also pay, so why has the extended producer responsibility scheme been delayed? Has the Minister looked at the impact on Newcastle streets and will she compensate the council?

Jo Churchill: We will be hearing the response to the extended producer responsibility consultation very shortly. I also highlight that, within a week, we have the Keep Britain Tidy and Clean for the Queen campaigns. That is about everyone taking on part of the responsibility and the extended producer responsibility scheme will help everyone to do that.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I know that the Minister gets regular updates on the situation at Walleys Quarry in Newcastle-under-Lyme. She knows that the problem is not yet solved and people are still having to live with it. What update can she give me? What hope can she give to my constituents? Can she update me on the work of the chief scientific adviser's team?

Jo Churchill: DEFRA's chief scientific adviser has been talking to independent external scientific experts about Walleys Quarry and site capping, gas management, air dispersal and leachate. My officials keep me regularly updated and my hon. Friend knows that I take it very seriously. I get weekly updates and I will keep on applying the pressure to ensure that we get the result.

T6. [906006] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I remind the House of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I say to the Secretary of State that farming faces a moment of existential crisis with massively increased input costs, especially for fuel and fertiliser, which could seriously reduce productivity in the long term. Will he use his office to bring together the unions, the supermarkets and other stakeholders in farming to find a way through so that farming has a long-term future?

George Eustice: Yes, we are doing that in fertiliser. We are also exploring options to identify alternative sources of animal protein.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for City of Chester, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Donations: Political Parties

1. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent assessment the commission has made of the due diligence requirements for donations to political parties from individuals and companies with links to the Russian Government. [905955]

Christian Matheson (City of Chester): Voters deserve to know that elections in the UK are free and fair and that laws are in place to safeguard them from unlawful influence. The law sets out what constitutes a permissible donor, including qualifying foreign donors from whom parties and hon. Members can accept donations. It requires the recipient to take reasonable steps to confirm the identity of the donor and check permissibility, and charges the commission with publishing the larger donations to parties so that voters can see them. The commission has recommended introducing new duties on parties to enhance due diligence and risk assessment of donations based on existing money laundering regulations, which would protect parties and build confidence among voters that sources of party funding are thoroughly scrutinised.

Mr Carmichael: The hon. Gentleman will have seen reports at the weekend surrounding concerns with regard to the awarding of a particular peerage, something on which there has been, as yet, no credible denial. Does he agree that, when we see such stories, we realise that we

need a stronger not a weaker Electoral Commission? For that reason, the Government should not be proceeding with the measures in the Elections Bill.

Christian Matheson: If the right hon. Gentleman will permit me, I will not be drawn on specific cases from the commission. The commission has said, however, that it would like to see enhanced due diligence to require political parties to assess and manage the risk of unlawful foreign funding and would support the adoption of a "know your donor" culture when making decisions on donations. It will also check and audit some of the donations that are made known to it to make sure that they comply. I am sure that, if he has concerns about individual donations, he will let the commission know of them.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Global Summit: Freedom of Religion or Belief

3. **Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con): What role the Church of England has in supporting the global summit to promote freedom of religion or belief, to be hosted by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in July 2022. [905957]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Church is making every effort to support that important summit to promote freedom of religion or belief. A debate was held on the lack of global religious freedom at last month's General Synod and I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), in her capacity as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, was able to brief Synod members on the huge cost of following Jesus in many parts of the world.

Caroline Ansell: Has my hon. Friend seen the 2021 research report, "Defeating Minority Exclusion and Unlocking Potential: Christianity in the Holy Land", which reflects the significance of that community's contribution to public value and welfare but also the vulnerability of its position? Does he agree that the forthcoming ministerial summit presents an excellent opportunity to discuss and debate its findings and recommendations?

Andrew Selous: I have seen the report and I share my hon. Friend's concerns about its findings, which show the political and economic instability and the social intimidation that people are facing. The international ministerial meeting in July will provide an opportunity for that research to be widely shared and for the report's concerns to be addressed.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): At the summit coming up this year, it will be really important to have individual stories from the countries where persecution is rife, whether that is China, India, Pakistan, Iran or other parts of the world. Will that be part of the conference?

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who takes a very serious interest in these matters. He is absolutely right. The Archbishop of Canterbury has

just been in Pakistan, including Peshawar, where Pastor William Siraj was horrendously murdered on 30 January this year. Those stories must be heard, and he is absolutely right.

Ukraine

4. Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to support the people of Ukraine. [905958]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Church is responding through prayer, giving and action. Parishes across the country prayed for peace on 27 February and are supporting humanitarian appeals. Chaplaincies across Europe are providing support to refugees now. The Church has sold its investments in Russian firms and there were no investments, I am pleased to say, in Russian sovereign debt.

Felicity Buchan: Churches throughout my constituency, including St James's in Norlands, and indeed other faith institutions have been at the forefront of the humanitarian appeal for Ukraine. Can I ask my hon. Friend specifically if the Church Commissioners have plans to sponsor refugees as part of the upcoming humanitarian sponsorship scheme?

Andrew Selous: Again, I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. I can tell her that the Church of England has been one of the major partners in the community sponsorship of refugees in the past and stands ready to do so again. We are urgently awaiting further details from the Home Office and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on how the sponsorship route will work, and we certainly intend to be fully involved.

Family Hubs

5. Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What support the Church of England is providing to family hubs. [905959]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Bishop of Durham chairs the multi-denominational Church works commission, which is engaging with the Government on how churches can best participate in family hubs, as we believe that churches, other faiths and the voluntary sector all have a very important role to play in the successful delivery of family hubs.

Dr Cameron: Church groups have been supporting excellent 12-step programmes, including Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, for many years. The all-party parliamentary group on the twelve steps recovery programme from addiction, which I chair, is very keen to hear how the Church Commissioners are supporting mental health and addiction issues, including linking with 12-step programmes in family hubs.

Andrew Selous: Well, I would be delighted to arrange a meeting with the hon. Lady's all-party group on this important subject. I can tell her that the Church works commission is already working with Government Departments and leading Christian charities on proposals to tackle mental wellbeing and loneliness. The diocese of Manchester, for example, runs a large-scale project to support young people's mental health and has a mental

health wellbeing youth worker. The Bishop of St Albans leads on our addictions work and has done particular work on gambling.

Warroch Hill

6. John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to ensure that the Warroch Hill property in Perthshire contributes to the local environment. [905960]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Warroch Hill tree planting scheme will sequester carbon, protect water courses and reduce incidents of flash flooding. Local jobs have been created, and the biodiversity of the site is being significantly increased in comparison with its former use as an upland hill farm.

John Lamont: I very much welcome that response, and I also welcome the investment that the Church of England is making in Scotland, but what progress is the Church making to ensure that all of its investments—not only in Scotland, but across the UK—are contributing positively to the environment?

Andrew Selous: That is a very good and welcome challenge from my hon. Friend, and I can reassure him that the Church Commissioners are committed to the long-term stewardship of our land and seek to adopt best practice in meeting the global challenges of combating climate change and reducing biodiversity loss. Our forests are managed in accordance with the UK forestry standard and the UK woodland assurance standard, which also protect water resources and enhance soils. The Church, along with other major landowners, has also signed the National Trust's nature-based solutions compact.

Housing

7. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to provide affordable and sustainable housing on its estate. [905961]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): We are currently delivering 29,000 new homes, of which around 9,000 will be affordable. These can be small, edge-of-village developments, or major master-planned new communities with, for example, country parks, sporting and community facilities, allotments, schools, shops, healthcare facilities, libraries and cafés.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Clearly, there is a desperate need for social rented housing in this country, and the belief is that we need between 90,000 and 100,000 homes a year. The Church has enormous amounts of land. Will he encourage the Church to give up more of its land for social rented accommodation?

Andrew Selous: I thank my hon. Friend for that important question, and his passion for this issue is shared by the Archbishop of Canterbury, no less. The Church Commissioners' land portfolio has the potential to deliver around 30,000 new homes across England, and the Church is determined to play its part in tackling the housing crisis. Developments will have a mixture of market rate and affordable homes, and we are committed to building vibrant communities, learning from best

practice in the Duchy of Cornwall and elsewhere. In the village of Shepherdswell in Kent, for example, 10 of the 13 new village homes will be affordable.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for City of Chester, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Impartiality

8. **Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): To ask the hon. Member for City of Chester, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, if the Committee will make an assessment of the impartiality of the Electoral Commission. [905962]

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The Commission is statutorily accountable to the Speaker's Committee for the economical, efficient and effective discharge of its functions. The Committee scrutinises the Commission's financial, operational and strategic planning on an ongoing basis. Yesterday, it took evidence from the Commission in public on its annual estimate and five-year corporate plan. As of yesterday, the Committee has no plans to make an assessment, and the Commission has impartiality.

Mr Bone: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's response. This week the former Speaker of the House of Commons got his comeuppance for being mean and unfair to a number of people, by bullying them and by using his power. The Electoral Commission was also mean and unfair to a number of people, by using its power to bully them. Mr Speaker, you have changed the position of the Speaker, and it is widely regarded across the House that you are fair and impartial. Does the hon. Gentleman believe that the new chair of the Electoral Commission can get the same widespread support for the impartiality and fairness of that Commission?

Christian Matheson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He is a regular attender and participant in these question times. I was part of the panel that appointed the current chair, and his appointment was endorsed unanimously by the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission. There is confidence that he understands the challenges that the hon. Gentleman, and others, have laid down for the Commission to meet. The Commission will also soon have a new chief executive, and I am little concerned that the hon. Gentleman should not look at the Speaker's Commission a bit like Trigger looked at his broom in "Only Fools and Horses". It has a new chair, a new chief executive, and it largely has completely new commissioners. They all understand the challenges that are laid down, and I hope that they will rise to them.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Columba Declaration

9. **Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): To ask the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners,

what joint projects have resulted from the Columba Declaration between the Church of England and Church of Scotland. [905963]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous):

The Columba Declaration has led to regular contact between the Churches, and the strengthening of both in serving their nations by co-operating on issues of public policy and promoting Christian life. One example of that is the Thy Kingdom Come partnership for nationwide prayer, adopted in November 2018. In Cumbria the Churches work together to form mission communities made up of all the churches in a locality.

Andrew Bowie: The Columba Declaration set out where the Churches of England and Scotland could allow close and growing co-operation in a multitude of areas, including where mutually supported work between the Church of England's Mission and Public Affairs, and the Church of Scotland's Church and Society Council, could work to support refugees. In light of what is happening in Ukraine, has there been any discussion or co-operation about that, under the terms of the Columba Declaration, meaning that the two Churches might pool resources and effort to support refugees who are fleeing that terrible situation in Ukraine?

Andrew Selous: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's question, and I reassure him that the two Churches have already been in touch with each other about supporting Ukrainian refugees. They will continue to share experience, and consider carefully whether joint action may be more effective as the situation develops.

Platinum Jubilee

10. **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): What plans the Church of England has to mark the platinum jubilee of Her Majesty The Queen. [905964]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous):

Her Majesty the Queen is the supreme governor of the Church of England and a supreme example of a life of public service, inspired by her hope in the Christian gospel. There will be a national service of celebration at St Paul's cathedral and special services and prayers across the country. The Church of England is an enthusiastic participant in the Queen's green canopy initiative across all of its 42 dioceses.

Greg Smith: In celebration of Her Majesty's platinum jubilee, St Mary's church in Princes Risborough wishes to do something practical and expand its community initiatives such as community outreach, mother and toddler groups and over-70s' lunch clubs. What can the Church of England do practically to support that great ambition?

Andrew Selous: I am delighted to learn about the excellent work that St Mary's in Princes Risborough is already doing in the parish, and it would be a fitting tribute to Her Majesty to build on that good work. I suggest that, in the first instance, St Mary's should get in touch with the director of mission and ministry in the Oxford diocese, who I am sure will have a number of practical suggestions of interest.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): May I say in passing how wonderful it is when we have a question session in which the people who reply are succinct and to the point. Perhaps we should get Ministers here for a lesson in how it is done. Will the Second Church Estates Commissioner tell us more about the plans to let this House know what the Church of England is doing in regard to the celebrations?

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that compliment. I repeat that there will be a national service of celebration at St Paul's cathedral organised by the Church of England. That will probably be the focal point, but I know that there will be enormous celebrations in his constituency, in mine and, indeed, in every constituency across these islands, and I hope that the Church of England, churches and all faith groups will be at the heart of them.

PARLIAMENTARY WORKS SPONSOR BODY

The right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside, representing the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body, was asked—

Restoration and Renewal: Impact on Roads and Air Quality

11. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment the sponsor body has made of the impact of the restoration and renewal project on (a) roads and (b) air quality in London. [905965]

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside): The restoration and renewal programme is committed to sustainability and meeting its environmental obligations. It had been working on developing a detailed and costed plan for restoration and renewal of the Palace, which would have included an environmental assessment on both the construction phase and the operations of the restored building. That work is currently paused following the decisions of both House Commissions in February.

Mr Sheerman: Following what the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) said, I thought that John Bercow as Speaker made some really good, radical reforms in this place.

The project of construction works that we will carry out in renewing this estate will be the biggest since its reconstruction after the second world war. Is my right hon. Friend aware that we could put much of the work on the river rather than on the roads, which will pollute the atmosphere, destroy lives and ruin London's transport system? Unfortunately, for the first scheme—the new museum and learning centre—a contract has been given to put all its materials on the road rather than on water. Will he look again at contracts that include transport on the river?

Mark Tami: The sponsor body had been looking at using the Thames, and I agree that anything we can take off the roads is a positive thing. As I said, the work is currently paused. My hon. Friend may want to take the issue up with the Leader of the House in business questions to get some clarity.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman rightly told us in detail about what has been done, and the environment and roads point is really important. Could the work that has been done be published as soon as possible?

Mark Tami: I agree that a lot of work has gone into the project and, whatever the direction of travel is, it is important that we do not lose the valuable work already done. I have been involved in the project for many years and can certainly say that the people involved have worked incredibly hard on it and done incredible work. Whatever direction is taken, it is important that we value their work and use it to ensure that the scheme is improved as well as to protect this place. At the end of the day, whatever individuals' views are on the project, it is about saving this Palace.

Mr Speaker: That now brings us on, nicely timed, to the urgent question.

Refugees from Ukraine

10.30 am

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary if she will make a statement about refugees from Ukraine.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): I am grateful for this opportunity to update the House on the Government's humanitarian response to Putin's depraved war on Ukraine. As the House knows, the UK's humanitarian support for Ukraine has been developed following close consultation with its Government and Governments in the region. On 4 March, I launched the Ukraine family scheme, which applies to immediate and extended Ukrainian family members, and everyone eligible is granted three years' leave to enter or remain. Today, I want to set out further changes that I am making to the process to make it quicker and simpler.

I have two overarching obligations: first, to keep the British people safe; secondly, to do all we can to help Ukrainians. No Home Secretary can take these decisions lightly, and I am in daily contact with the intelligence and security agencies, which are providing me with regular threat assessments. What happened in Salisbury showed what Putin is willing to do on our soil. It also demonstrated that a small number of people with evil intentions can wreak havoc on our streets.

This morning, I received assurances that enable me to announce changes to the Ukraine family scheme. Based on the new advice that I have received, I am now in the position to announce that vital security checks will continue on all cases. From Tuesday, Ukrainians with passports will no longer need to go to a visa application centre to give their biometrics before they come to the UK. Instead, once their application has been considered and the appropriate checks completed, they will receive direct notification that they are eligible for the scheme and can come to the UK.

In short, Ukrainians with passports will be able to get permission to come here fully online from wherever they are and will be able to give their biometrics once they are in Britain. That will mean that visa application centres across Europe can focus their efforts on helping Ukrainians without passports. We have increased the capacity at those centres to over 13,000 appointments a week. That streamlined approach will be operational as of Tuesday 15 March in order to make the relevant technology and IT changes.

I will of course update the House if the security picture changes and if it becomes necessary to make further changes to protect our domestic homeland security. Threat assessments are always changing and we will always keep our approach under review. In the meantime, I once again salute the heroism of the Ukrainian people.

Yvette Cooper: I have to ask the Home Secretary, why does it always take being hauled into the House of Commons to make basic changes to help vulnerable people who are fleeing from Ukraine?

A maternity hospital was bombed yesterday in an attack on newborn babies and women giving birth. People are fleeing for their lives and, up to now, the response from the Home Office has been a total disgrace,

bringing shame upon our country. A 90-year-old holocaust survivor was left in makeshift accommodation in Poland even though her granddaughter was struggling to get here. Mums with small kids have been told that they cannot get an appointment for weeks and have had to queue for days to get biometrics in freezing weather in Rzeszów, only to be told that they then have to travel 200 miles to Warsaw to pick up their visas.

It is welcome that the Home Secretary is now introducing the online approach. We know that different ways of doing this were tried for Hong Kong visas, but why has it taken so long when she has had intelligence for weeks, if not months, that she needed to prepare for a Russian invasion of Ukraine? If we still have to wait until Tuesday for this new system to come in, what is to happen for everybody else in the meantime? Why is she not bringing in the armed forces? They have offered to help. We have had 1,000 troops on stand-by to provide humanitarian help for two weeks, so why not use them now to set up the emergency centres and to get people passported through as rapidly as possible and get them into the country?

What about the Ukrainian nurse here on a healthcare visa? Is she finally to be allowed to bring her elderly parents to the country, which we have asked for for so long? Is this still just being restricted to those with family? Are they still going to have to fill in multiple online forms, or will the Home Secretary say that all those who want to come to the UK having fled the fighting in Ukraine can now come here without having to fill in loads of online forms or jump through a whole load of hoops?

This has just been shameful. We are pushing vulnerable people from pillar to post in their hour of need. Week after week we have seen this happen. It is deeply wrong to leave people in this terrible state. Our country is better than this. If she cannot get this sorted out, frankly she should hand the job over to somebody else who can.

Priti Patel: As ever, I am delighted to be in the Chamber. In fact, Mr Speaker, as you know, we were intending to give a statement this morning, so far from the comments from the Opposition Members, the right hon. Lady should have some perspective on all this.

If I may, I will just respond to some of the points that the Opposition party has made—of course, it is the job of the Opposition to attack the Government rather than find collective solutions and support the approach that the Government are taking. First and foremost, I have always maintained that we will take a pragmatic and agile approach to our response. We are making important changes. The right hon. Lady has asked why we are not making these changes immediately. They are subject to digital verification. There is no comparison to British national overseas schemes because 90% of Ukrainians do not have chip passports, so they would be excluded from any such scheme and approach.

Visa applications are important in this process. It is important that we are flexible in our response, and we have been. We are seeing that many Ukrainians do not have documentation. This country and all Governments, including probably a Government that the right hon. Lady once served in, will recognise that there was something known as the Windrush scandal and it is important that everyone who arrives in the UK has

[Priti Patel]

physical and digital records of their status here in the UK to ensure that they can access schemes—[*Interruption.*] Opposition Members may holler, but the process is vital in terms of verification, notification and permission to travel. It is important to give people status when they come to the United Kingdom, so that they have the right to work, the right to access benefits and digital verification of their status. That is absolutely right.

It is really important to remember again that although we have known that this attack has been coming, we have to work with the intelligence and security agencies. No disrespect to the right hon. Lady, but these checks and data—biographical and the warnings index—are important security checks that can be done through the digital process. They have been verified by the intelligence and security services, and we have to work with them in particular.

At a time of war and conflict, it is really important that we work together. I reflect on many of the comments and observations that I have heard directly from members of the Ukrainian community in this country, who I have spent time a great deal of time with this week, not just on their applications and how applications are processed but on how applications can be made both in the UK and outside the United Kingdom. There are not swathes and swathes of forms; there is a clear application process for families who undertake it.

We have been working within the Government, I emphasise to those in the House who want to listen to me rather than talk over me, and it is through that engagement, importantly, that many families have said that they want to see the country come together in the support. Rather than have misinformation about VAC appointments, which originated from the Opposition party, we should stick with the factual information about the scheme. Everybody should work together not just in promoting the scheme but in making sure that those who need our help are united in our collective approach to not only how we serve them but how we support them in getting their family members over to the United Kingdom.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Of course my right hon. Friend is absolutely right that many of the people who are fleeing from this appalling murder and mayhem, from war crimes and from breaches of the international rules of war want to remain as close as possible to the areas from which they have been driven, so that when this appalling catastrophe is over, they can return. Will she keep in touch with our European partners on both their practices and procedures so that we help these desperate people whom our constituents are rightly intent on us assisting, and so we are part of a co-ordinated and effective European response to this horrendous humanitarian crisis?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is right to refer to the need for a co-ordinated approach, and also to the response within the region. It is very clear that families want to stay there. I receive calls every day from my counterparts in the region—Ministers of the Interior—who are asking for aid to support those families who want to stay in the region because they want to go back home; and the ambassadors in the region are saying the same.

My right hon. Friend asked about the EU in particular. I am in constant contact with Commissioner Johansson to discuss how we can support the region and, specifically, countries and Ukrainian nationals in the region. The need for that co-ordinated response is so important, and the British Government, through a whole-Government effort, are supplying not only financial aid and support but practical aid and equipment to many countries in the region on the Ukrainian border that are asking us for direct help and support.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson, Brendan O'Hara.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): We broadly welcome the Government's U-turn—it is a big step forward—but, as we have heard, it did not have to be this way. This war was foreseen, and the humanitarian crisis that has resulted from it was widely predicted. As I said yesterday, the Government have lagged behind the public, and I suspect that public pressure in many Conservative MPs' inboxes has brought about this change, welcome as it is.

Yesterday, at the Home Affairs Committee, the Ukrainian ambassador was shocked to learn from my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) that the Ukrainians who are currently here without permanent residency, namely students and workers, had absolutely no rights that would allow them to bring relatives to the UK under the bespoke system. The ambassador said that he would raise the issue with the Home Secretary. Did he do so, and is that loophole covered by the measures that she has announced? May I also ask what discussions she has had, and will have, with the devolved Administrations about how to ensure that these measures are successful?

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the approach and the tone that he has taken. It is important for us to work together, and the Immigration Minister is in touch with the devolved Administrations. As we have made clear from day one, these are important discussions about the need to work collegiately and collectively on our response. This cannot be done purely through central Government; we have to work across the country to provide the support that is needed. Yesterday I was in Manchester and Derby, meeting members of the Ukrainian diaspora community to hear about their needs and to discuss how we can work not only centrally but with local authorities to give wider support.

The hon. Gentleman asked some important questions about, for example, students. There are many others who have leave to stay in this country and can have their leave extended to 36 months, and we are making that clear across the board. I have also been clear about the agility of our response, and about our approach to enabling family members to come here as well. That work is under way in the Department, and is taking place right now. As I have said, I will come back to update the House. I am also in touch with the Ukrainian ambassador nearly every day, primarily because a range of cases inevitably arise and casework is complicated. Many Members of Parliament have been using caseworking facilities that have been provided for them in Portcullis House. As we identify challenges—not everyone has documentation, not everyone has a passport—we need

to find ways in which we can work together to bring people here, which is why everything is under review and why we have that agile response.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary's announcement. May I make a further suggestion—a practical one, I hope—that could alleviate the situation? According to the House of Commons Library, there are 35,000 Ukrainian citizens in the UK, and I know that they are sick with worry—worried to death—about their elderly mothers, their babies, their grandchildren and so on. Would it not be possible for us to have a hub for them here in the UK, so that everything could be done from here and they could be given provisional visas to come into the country, and we could then check the biometrics here?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for her suggestion and comments. We are actually doing this across the country now. Yesterday I was in Manchester, where we are working with the Ukrainian community group, and also in Derby. There is a whole network in the Ukrainian diaspora, and they have asked us not for a hub in London—we have one in the Ukrainian social club in London, and we stepped that up at the beginning of the week—but for hubs within community centres. We are establishing that and working with the community to do that.

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

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. While I welcome the changes for Ukrainian passport holders, many Ukrainians do not have passports, as the Home Secretary has just said. I want to ask her about TLScontact, which has been subcontracted by the Home Office to carry out biometric checks. The chief inspector of borders and immigration told the Home Secretary that TLScontact was so hellbent on making profit that its use posed a risk of “reputational damage” to the UK. With Ukrainians fleeing for their lives and the chaos at the visa application centres with long waits and few appointments, can the Secretary of State tell me why that company is allowed to profit from the suffering and misery of Ukrainians by telling them that if they make additional payments, their cases will be expedited and they will get appointments more quickly? Is that right?

Priti Patel: Let me just share the information I know about the contracted service with TLScontact. First and foremost, we have surged capacity at visa application centres, as I have said several times in the House. That is a contractual process that we have, alongside working with Home Office staff in country, and further staff have been sent out. The right hon. Lady asked specifically about the contractual arrangements with TLScontact. Our priority has been to surge its staff in country to create more appointments, and we have surged appointments. There have been 6,000 appointments available this week, and as of Tuesday 15 March, there will be 13,000 appointments for people who do not have documentation and passports. We can prioritise those without documentation and passports. Those with passports can use the digital service that will be set up and go live from Tuesday. I will come back to the Chair of the

Select Committee on the contractual details, primarily because these details are organised through the Departments and there is a procurement process that goes on. I will write to her on the specifics. With regard to Ukrainian nationals coming to the United Kingdom to be reunited with their families, this is a free service. There are no charges in place whatsoever.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I welcome the measures announced today. They will be coming in next Tuesday, but could not the Home Secretary today suspend the carrier liability duty for Ukrainian passport holders presenting at Krakow or Warsaw airports to come to the UK so that they can have the checks done in a secure setting here and be granted at least a visitor's visa? Or could she not remove Ukraine from the list of excluded countries so that they could come here in the same way as an American tourist and be granted a visitor's visa, subject to checks being carried out in a secure setting? Am I wrong?

Priti Patel: As ever, my hon. Friend is making practical suggestions, but I am afraid that those checks cannot be suspended. There has already been work across Government to look at the carrier liability aspect. It is the electronic authorisation to travel that we are speeding up through this digital system, so that once the individual receives the authorisation, they can go straight to a port, show they have authorisation to travel and then board a train or plane to get the United Kingdom. We cannot make any other travel changes on that basis because of the wider implications that that has for other carriers.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I think the whole House just wants the Government and the UK to be as generous and unbureaucratic as possible, and if that is where we are getting to, we are pleased, but there is something that still nags away at me. As I understand it, from what we were told in the Foreign Affairs Committee, the Government have known since October or November last year that Putin either wanted or intended to do this. So, on so many levels we have been really running to catch up, and a lot of us are asking why we did not know that we needed to put all this in place two months ago. Also, I want Putin to be in a court of law, but the International Criminal Court cannot judge a leader just on the basis of initiating a war of aggression, so will the Home Secretary work to change that law?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is right that we knew this attack was planned. Our schemes have obviously been developed with the Governments in the region, which I must emphasise. Right now, the countries in the region have different requirements of the Home Office in how we undertake our checks and process individuals. We are trying to simplify this to make it easier across the board.

Last week, the Polish Government asked us not to process people in close proximity to the border but to use our visa application centres. The Hungarian Government have asked us for a totally different approach, and they have asked for liaison officers on the ground. The Romanian Government are asking us to come to the border. We have deliberately chosen to use the facilities of the visa application centres to give certainty and consistency of approach. Clearly, our objective throughout has been to try to streamline the process.

[Priti Patel]

The digital piece is challenging; it is not straightforward. We have to change our codes, our systems and our structures, while recognising that many Ukrainians do not have electronic passports. Passports and travel documentation are not consistent around the world, hence my comment about the chip checker on the BNO scheme, under which 97,000 visas have been granted.

The hon. Gentleman asked about President Putin and war crimes, and I assure the House that significant work is taking place in this area across Government and with the police and the Crown Prosecution Service.

Chris Bryant: The laws need to change.

Priti Patel: Exactly, the laws do need to change. We will look at every single aspect of prosecutions and how we can ensure that we all achieve the right outcome.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I am grateful for what my right hon. Friend said about the number of appointments there will be, and I am grateful to the visa application centre staff for working so hard, but I understand that the Warsaw centre closes at 5 pm and at weekends. Could she do something to extend the opening hours?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The opening hours are because of labour laws in Poland. There have been extensive discussions with the Government, the Foreign Office and the Home Office on extensions. We would love the centres to work much longer hours, including at weekends. Believe me, we have been pursuing this. As I said, every country in the region has a different response and different laws that we have to respect and work with. We are doing everything we possibly can to get those extensions.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I do not think I have ever seen my Edinburgh South West constituents more angry than they are this week about what the Government have done, or not done, so far.

The fictional Prime Minister Jim Hacker once said:

“It doesn’t do the Government any good to look heartless and feeble simultaneously”.

Well, I am afraid this Government have for the past week. I welcome this U-turn, but will the Home Secretary take the opportunity to apologise to the Ukrainian refugees whose suffering has been needlessly exacerbated by the Home Office’s ineptitude? And will she apologise to my many constituents who have Ukrainian relatives whose suffering has been exacerbated by her Department’s ineptitude?

Priti Patel: To correct the hon. and learned Lady, since I became Home Secretary we have welcomed 20,000 Afghan refugees and 97,000 Hong Kongers to the United Kingdom over the last two years. These numbers are unprecedented, and I will take no lectures from her about heartlessness, particularly in light of the lack of take-up of the dispersal scheme for people coming to the United Kingdom who need housing. On those fleeing persecution, she and her Government need to look at themselves.

The hon. and learned Lady has heard me tell the House a few times about the work we are doing directly with the Ukrainian community and diaspora to help their family members come over. It would be good to recognise that we achieve the right outcomes not just by working together but by supporting them through the application process.

Joanna Cherry: You have not done that to date.

Priti Patel: Actually, we have. I am sorry if the hon. and learned Lady has not been able to use the many facilities we have made available to her constituents and her to make these cases come through.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s announcement today, and she knows that I and others have been pushing for tech and biometrics to be used more constructively. On the repurposing of officials and their movement to the front-line, not just from within the Home Office, but from across Government, will she work with the excellent new refugees Minister to ensure that we can get that sense of co-ordination and urgency here? As Russia leaves the Council of Europe and denounces the European convention on human rights, the slide into tyranny continues. This is a crisis that will not wait.

Priti Patel: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right; we are blessed with the appointment of our noble Friend in the other place as refugees Minister, because this is about co-ordination. This is about national co-ordination, not about one Department or another Department; this is “whole of Government effort”, a phrase I have used several times in this House. The refugees Minister will be overseeing much of the community sponsorship scheme, which will come in due course, and there will be further announcements about that scheme, too.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary confirm that Ukrainians with dual nationality, for example, Ukrainian and Romanian nationality, will none the less be able to come to the UK under the family scheme?

Priti Patel: Yes, the hon. Lady is absolutely right on that. We are seeing many dual nationals come forward, which is why we are absolutely trying to streamline the system to make it easier for them to apply. The other point to make about applications is that these applications can be made in-country—in Ukraine. Again, that will speed up the ability of these people to come to the UK.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I am grateful for the announcement today, which will directly benefit the families of my constituents. May I ask for a point of clarification? Can a Ukrainian who has a Ukrainian ID card rather than a passport apply entirely online?

Priti Patel: No. This will be passports only, because of all the security checks that can be made through passport data. This shows part of the problem of the wider challenge we have had on documentation. These types of cases will need to go to the visa application centres, but, as I have said, we have just increased the capacity to more than 13,000 appointments. Of course, if any other issues arise, we can also pick up casework directly.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is disappointing that the right hon. Lady needs to be dragged here to make the process simpler and quicker. A lot of the people in this country will not understand why it is so complicated. She has already responded to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on why we cannot just let people come here and have the checks done here, as we do for millions of visitors from non-visa countries. So will she at least commit to looking into whether that is possible, because Ukrainians who flee war have gone through days and weeks of trauma and exhaustion, and they deserve to be treated better?

Priti Patel: I have always made it abundantly clear in the House that our approach is always under review—it is under review for a range of issues, for example, as the situation changes or the security threat level changes. The hon. Lady has just asked why we cannot just let people through. There is a range of advice that I have to consider. Having considered all the advice and looked at the approach we can take, my priority has been to streamline the approach. Clearly, it is not appropriate to keep sending people who do not necessarily need to go to visa application centres to those centres. We can now prioritise those who are more vulnerable and do not have documentation, and we want to focus on those individuals. The final point to make is that not only are we as a country generous in our approach to people fleeing persecution, but this is how the Government's approach has always been, in terms of safe routes, legal routes, Afghan refugees and British nationals overseas who have come to the UK. That has been at the heart of the Government's work. For every crisis that takes place in the world there is no single solution. We have to develop bespoke solutions, which is what we have done.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): As one of the top six customers of the Home Office on immigration issues, I have seen how this situation underlines the chaos in the Home Office's immigration system. It is really struggling to keep up with the basics and when dealing with this surge it has understandably crumbled under the pressure. I am concerned that we have been waiting for all these days. We know that security checks need to take place, but what security risk is there from 90-year-old women, from people in their 60s, from mothers and small children? Has the right hon. Lady not given some thought to progressing them through faster and doing more checks on them here in the UK?

Priti Patel: Yes, and that is exactly what we have been doing.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I welcome what the Home Secretary said about combining security with a generous approach, both of which are essential and must be delivered. In my experience of the Home Office, officials there who are focused on the protection of our country respond well to clear and decisive leadership, so may I check something so that it is clear? Does the Home Secretary retain overall responsibility for the whole of our refugee policy, including the humanitarian sponsorship scheme? People should know where the buck stops. When does she expect to come to the House to set out further details on that scheme?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is fair to say that he will be too familiar with the various processes around immigration checks, digitalisation and security, and the wider considerations that constantly have to be made. In terms of wider refugee policy, this is a whole-of-Government effort, so parts of it, particularly the community sponsorship route that I announced to the House last week, will be led by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, which will lead on that primarily because of the local authority engagement and safeguarding that is required. There will be further announcements on that. The work of the Minister for Refugees will be split between both Departments to assist with the co-ordination effort that is required. I know my right hon. Friend will be familiar with how the Syrian vulnerable refugee scheme was created. In effect, we are trying to build on some of the previous models that have worked successfully in government.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for the calm and collected manner in which she presented the statement and for the manner in which she has dealt with the really serious and complicated problems that this situation represents. Furthermore, I commend Members from both sides of the House who have shown conspicuous interest in trying to get together on this subject rather than just producing carping criticisms.

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and his acknowledgement of the difficult work. As a country, our priority is of course absolutely to bring people over from Ukraine at their time of desperate need and give them the protection that they need. As I said, every crisis requires a bespoke response and that is what this Government have been working on.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Home Secretary is doing a difficult job at this stressful time because of the horrible war that Putin has unleashed against these innocent people, but may I give her one tiny bit of advice? We really want to keep this cross-party support for the people in Ukraine, but will she remember that sometimes her tone is a bit aggressive? She did lose some of us on the Opposition Benches when she seemed to suggest that we could not be trusted with security information. We were also a bit disappointed when she got her facts wrong about what was happening in Calais.

Priti Patel: I acknowledge the hon. Gentlemen's comments. It is important that, as a country and in this House in particular, we unite against Putin and what he is doing. We must never lose sight of what President Putin is doing to Ukraine and the people of Ukraine. That is something that this entire House, particularly this week, should absolutely get behind.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am grateful to the Home Secretary for her approach. Please forgive me, but I did not hear correctly whether it was 13,000 appointments per day or per week. She mentioned many of the countries where we have visa application centres, but a disproportionate number of people have gone to the small country of Moldova, which is not in the EU. Have we beefed up the visa application centre there?

Priti Patel: Yes. First, on the visa applications at VACs in the region, once we launch the digital approach, those 13,000 appointments next week will primarily be for those individuals who are vulnerable, without documentation, who will need our help to get their status, and we will need to do much more work with them.

Secondly, on Moldova, I spoke to EU Commissioner Johansson on Monday. She called me specifically about assistance for Moldova, which is having a very challenging time not just in respect of the number of refugees but at its borders. Moldova is finding that a number of third-country nationals are now presenting, trying to present themselves as Ukrainians when in fact they are not, and they have border-security problems as well. We have been specifically asked to provide assistance with security equipment and help to prevent weapons from coming into the country. I have also spoken to the Minister for Internal Affairs there this week. A lot of work is taking place directly to support the Government there as they support people fleeing Ukraine.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): My constituent, Gareth Roberts of Trawsfynydd, is presently travelling to the Slovakia border with his wife, Natasha, to meet her daughter and granddaughter. Gareth is a fluent Russian and Ukrainian speaker and is well able to help the family make the digital applications, but he tells me that the applications can be made only in English and that this will directly affect many vulnerable Ukrainian applicants. Will the Secretary of State confirm that it will be possible, in future, to make these applications in Ukrainian? Better still, will she waive all these restrictive visa requirements?

Priti Patel: The applications are in English, because the checks have to be done in the UK by British people. Work is taking place to see what else we can do. In particular, we are bringing in Ukrainian and Russian speakers to help us not just with translations, but to see what more we can do to deal with getting forms in the right language and to have more staff in our centres, working directly with the Ukrainian community. That also applies in the UK in the hubs that we are creating.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I warmly welcome today's announcement, which I and other colleagues have been calling for. As my right hon. Friend knows after her visit at the weekend, which I thank her for, the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain is headquartered in my constituency. Given the amount of correspondence and issues that it receives, I wonder whether she would consider a direct link for it into the Home Office?

Priti Patel: I give my thanks to the centre for everything that it has been doing. It was very humbling to spend so much time with the people there on Sunday. I was able to understand from them the issues, barriers and challenges that they face. I have said from day 1 that we should work with the community. We have to ensure that everything that we do works for the people there. We are providing direct help. We are setting up a hub specifically in the centre for the community. I have been quite struck by some of the complexities that we have seen, particularly with elderly family members and how they can come to the United Kingdom. The hub in my hon. Friend's constituency will be replicated in some of the other locations that I referred to earlier on.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): My constituent's Ukrainian wife, Liudmyla Florence, was turned away from the UK visa office in Warsaw and told that she had to book an appointment and make an application online. The UK immigration website repeatedly stated, "Sorry, there is currently a problem with the service. Please try again later." She eventually was given an appointment, but not until 17 March. What is Liudmyla supposed to do while the Home Secretary is getting her act together?

Priti Patel: If the hon. Lady had listened to my statement earlier on, she would have heard what the process is. In fact, the application can be done digitally from Tuesday. If she would like to present me with the case, I would be very happy to look at it straight after —[*Interruption.*] Well, we do have the hub in Portcullis House, which has been working through cases. I do not know whether the hon. Lady has been using that service. If she has difficulty with that, she is very welcome to give me the case straight after the urgent question and I will make the calls myself directly.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I was shocked to hear the shadow Home Secretary imply that Labour would throw away or downplay essential security checks in its mad dash to be seen to be doing something. I know that our Home Secretary will stand firm on our borders. Will she also use this opportunity to thank the many thousands of families around this country who have stepped forward to say that they wish to give support to Ukrainian families and will she tell them —[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. To be honest, I do not remember it quite how the hon. Gentleman does. I do not want a slanging match, and we need to be correct on the information that we challenge, so, please, let us check *Hansard*.

Richard Fuller: I am grateful, Mr Speaker, and if I got that wrong, I apologise to the shadow Home Secretary. My point was about the balance that the Home Secretary has to take. Will she use this opportunity to thank the many thousands of British families who have stepped forward to say that they wish to help Ukrainian families, and tell them that she will work night and day to enable them to fulfil their generosity?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right in everything he has said—there is no question whatsoever about that. The Ukrainian community across the United Kingdom has been extraordinary in its resolve and fortitude at a very difficult time to provide much-needed support and resource and, importantly, to support people coming over to the United Kingdom. I do not want to pre-empt any further statements on community support, primarily because there is a scheme under development in Government, but many members of the community have been shaping that scheme and how that help can be given.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I spoke this week in this place about a constituent of mine. Yesterday he made it to Warsaw with his Ukrainian wife and their daughters, to be told that he might get an appointment on 18 March but that they were not sure

because the systems were down and they would have to wait until they came back up to check that that was possible. I do not think anything the Home Secretary has said today will help my constituent forward, because he has been told to apply yet again. The systems are not working. The only things working are the women—they are mainly women—that I have seen down in Portcullis House. They are working their butts off to try to help, but the systems do not work and online applications will make things even worse.

Priti Patel: Sorry, but our systems have been working and they are working. I cannot comment on the hon. Lady's particular case or the generalities she has spoken about, but, as I have said, I will happily take the matter away and look at it directly. I cannot respond to general statements about systems not working when there are thousands of applications being made on a daily basis.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I welcome the extra flexibility that my right hon. Friend has introduced into the system, particularly the capacity to take biometrics in this country, which she will know many of us have called for. Are these new arrangements simply for those coming on the family route or do they apply more generally? If the former, can she give some indication of when we will hear more about the humanitarian sponsorship route?

Priti Patel: The simplifications are to the family scheme. It is the same scheme, but we are simplifying and digitalising the process. I cannot pre-empt the humanitarian scheme, which is being led by DLUHC, but there will be statements. I cannot say when, because the Department is working on the details of the scheme.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): May I raise the case of Artur Nadiiev, a Ukrainian PhD student at the University of Nottingham? Artur has encountered confusion and difficulties in applying for a UK student visa. He is currently in Munich. On 5 March, UKVI advised that he needs to take a tuberculosis test to obtain a visa, even though Home Office updated rules for Ukrainian citizens travelling to the UK state that TB tests have been waived. Can the Home Secretary clarify whether Artur can now obtain his visa and come to the UK without needing to travel to a third country in order to obtain a TB test?

Priti Patel: That is absolutely correct.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): This country has a proud history of providing sanctuary to those fleeing for their lives, and I welcome the various routes we have made available to those displaced from Ukraine. There will always be those who seek to exploit this country's generosity for more malicious aims, so will my right hon. Friend confirm that the integrity of the appropriate security checks will not be compromised in speeding up the visa process?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that has been verified through the agencies and Departments we work with.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): With one of the largest Ukrainian populations in the country in Westminster, I welcome this late change of heart by the

Government. I hope it will work, and work considerably more effectively than the Afghan scheme did. May I seek clarification on the issue of work visas? Does this scheme mean that those here on work visas will be able to bring, for example, dependent relatives?

Priti Patel: As I said earlier, we are looking at all categories, including Ukrainians on work visas and even student visas, and how we can make that happen.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): I welcome today's announcement and thank the Home Secretary for listening to the House. My constituent Larry Sullivan owns a technology business in Russia and has some very able young software engineers desperate to get here. They would make a big contribution to the UK economy. They are fanatically against Putin's war of aggression. Is there a route for them to come here before Putin slams the door shut?

Priti Patel: If I may, I will come back to my right hon. Friend and discuss that with him, because there will be ways.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Last week, I asked the Home Secretary about the arrangements for refugees when they come here. Many of them will need places for their children in schools and mental health support, and, under both schemes, many will want accommodation. She said that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is responsible for these arrangements through the community sponsorship scheme, but is the Home Office then responsible for people under the family scheme? In the Select Committee on Monday, we asked the DLUHC permanent secretary, who confirmed that currently there are no arrangements in place, none have been agreed, and he could not give a timetable for when they would be agreed. Will the Home Secretary update the House on what the arrangements are under both schemes, or will the DLUHC Secretary come to this House in the near future to update us?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the sponsorship route is led by DLUHC. As we discussed in the House last week, accommodation will be a vital part of sponsorship, as will the engagement with local authorities. I cannot pre-empt the work of DLUHC. Further statements will be made on this. He also spoke about the family scheme. The community and family members are absolutely working together on that. There is no doubt—we should be very clear about this—that access to public funds and public services is absolutely guaranteed within the family route. That is why we are working on this collectively across Government. It is a Government effort; it is not about one Department versus another, although some will lead on various details. We are working with DLUHC but also with the devolved Administrations, in particular, to give them the support they need when more members of the Ukrainian community come over to be reunited with their families.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): I welcome today's announcement, which I am sure will also be welcomed by the many Gedling residents who also want a generous approach. My right hon. Friend has spoken about the processing centres in Poland, but will she update us on the processing of visas for those Ukrainian refugees currently in northern France?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We have surged our visa application centre capacity across the region. There are sites in France, with work in Calais and in Lille, and we are looking to expand our capacity in France based on working with the French Government, who are effectively identifying, right now, the various routes that people are using to travel through France to the United Kingdom.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): My constituents have been in touch with me about this issue on many occasions, and I think that they will think it perverse that those who are considered vulnerable will still have to make these journeys to the centres. Has the Secretary of State done an assessment of how many of the people they are seeing fit into the vulnerable category, how many people this change will actually help, and what more can be done to help the vulnerable?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady makes an important point. It is important to restate that about 90% of Ukrainian nationals do not have chip passports, for example, whereby the digital scheme would automatically apply to them to make it easier. The reason we are clearing the VAC system now is to help those in the vulnerable people abroad category, including the elderly and those who have not travelled previously. A frequent theme that comes back from members of the diaspora community here is that many are still reluctant to leave Ukraine—they are still in Lviv and thinking about coming. We are encouraging them to engage with their family members here so that we can give them support. We do not yet have a full assessment. That is why we are working with the Ukrainian community in this country for them to share as much information with us as they possibly can.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): President Putin has not only unleashed death and destruction on the people of Ukraine but is also involved in ethnic cleansing, and we should face up to that. Many of those fleeing in fear of their lives will want to go back after Putin's forces have gone from the country. Others will want to resettle. Will my right hon. Friend make the system as flexible as possible so that those who want to resettle in the UK can do so, but those who want to come on a temporary basis will be able to return to their native country?

Priti Patel: This is the theme that we hear constantly throughout the community—a recognition that, of course, people will want to go home. It is their country; it is the place of their birth; it is where they have lived their lives. There is no question about that. That is why we are taking a consistent approach across all schemes to the leave period that people can come here for, even those on temporary leave.

The point about ethnic cleansing is so valid. There are still people of Ukrainian origin in Russia who are subject to appalling persecution. Those people are also in our thoughts, and we want to consider how we can help them, too.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Yesterday, I spoke to a senior member of the Ukrainian community in my constituency. He wanted to know what sorts of resettlement schemes are being looked at to support orphans and unaccompanied children arriving here, and whether the Home Secretary would consider waiving all visa requirements for them.

Priti Patel: This is a very important point. I have had similar discussions with the Ukrainian community across the country. As I may have mentioned previously in the House, there are a number of issues around safeguarding children, particularly those travelling through Europe, and even at the border, a number of safeguarding and trafficking cases are now materialising. In terms of unaccompanied children and orphans coming to the United Kingdom, we have to work across Government with the relevant Departments. Local authority work is being stood up to look at safeguarding and protection and how children can be brought over to the UK in a safe way, to ensure they come to our country and are given all the help and support they need.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. She will know that Simon Tagg, the leader of Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council, together with all the other local authority leaders across Staffordshire, wrote yesterday to the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary saying that the people of Staffordshire and the authorities in Staffordshire stand ready and able to welcome Ukrainian refugees. Will the Home Secretary work with the Communities Secretary to make sure we in Staffordshire can play our part?

Priti Patel: The answer is yes.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): My constituents, who I am not naming publicly at their request, found out in December that they were expecting a baby through surrogacy in Ukraine. I visited the hub yesterday, and they have been told that the surrogate mother does not qualify under the family visa scheme. I have been told by the Home Secretary's officials that nothing can be done about it. After yesterday's scenes of the bombing of the maternity hospital in Ukraine, the Home Secretary can only imagine how my constituents are feeling about their baby, who is expected in a few months' time and who is a British citizen upon birth. Will she look again at this policy personally, with a view to making a small tweak to it for the small number of families who fall into this category?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the issue of surrogacy cases—a number of those cases have been raised with me. We are absolutely looking to make changes to this: there are various requirements we need to make in the UK with those particular families who will be expecting a child through a surrogate, and we are looking at how that can all be brought together and families united. I am aware of these cases.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement this morning, and thank her for the number of times she has made herself available to engage with all Members on these important issues, in the face of rapidly changing circumstances. Given the changes she has announced this morning, can she give me an assurance that we have now reached the optimum point in the balance between her first duty, which is to protect the national security of our country, and stripping away every unnecessary piece of bureaucracy that prevents or delays us from helping, supporting and welcoming people fleeing the war at Putin's hand?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I said in my statement, our No. 1 priority is to keep our country safe, while streamlining processes where we can. We will continue to do so; we will not stop here. My final point is that situations can change, and with that, threat assessments can change as well. Obviously, I will keep colleagues updated on that.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Home Secretary has been on the wrong side of history and the wrong side of humanity. We are talking about women, children and older people. My constituent's friend has just crossed the border into Poland, and when she went to get her visa she was told to go back to a city called Kyiv, in the middle of a war zone. There is still chaos at the borders—the Home Secretary shakes her head, but she was told that. There is chaos at the borders, so why can people not come visa free to the UK border to collect their documentation and then get the warm welcome that the Home Secretary talks about?

Priti Patel: I refer the hon. Lady to the statement I made earlier. I cannot comment on the anecdotal evidence that she has given, but bearing in mind that Kyiv is obviously under siege, it is thoroughly inappropriate if anybody made that comment.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement, which will be richly welcomed by the Ukrainian families in Southend West I have been meeting. In particular, I welcome the digitalisation of the family scheme. My question is around that. The devil is not in the detail with digitalisation, but the scale. We currently have tens of thousands of applications being made. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that the scheme will cope with the scale we may have on it?

Priti Patel: These are big digital challenges that we all face, there is no question about that, but we are working through assurance to ensure that systems can cope and withstand some of the wider technological and digital challenges that come from a hostile country that we are effectively trying to operate against.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I and my constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran welcome any improvements that can be made to the current scheme for those Ukrainians who are fleeing violence, but there still seems to be a lack of urgency and flexibility from the UK, so what more will the Home Secretary do as the humanitarian situation deteriorates, as we all sadly fear it will? Does she have any concerns about how history will judge the UK's response relative to the EU's response on this matter?

Priti Patel: I refer to my comments earlier, but let me make it abundantly clear for the hon. Lady that in terms of the EU response, we are working in co-operation and collaboration with the EU. There is no doubt about that whatever. The EU has a different approach, but even at this stage it has not agreed the number of people who will go country by country. We are working with them at a very difficult time not only on the humanitarian approach, but on ensuring that we support each country that has been heavily affected not just in terms of

border issues, but in receiving Ukrainian refugees. That is a collective response not just from the British Government, but in conjunction with the EU.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I welcome the simplification of the scheme that my right hon. Friend has announced today, and I recognise how hard the job for the Home Office team is. As we make every effort to help those fleeing this crisis, can she provide a bit more information to the House about the surge capacity that she has put in for Home Office staff to process visa applications in countries where the majority of the Ukrainian refugees are fleeing?

Priti Patel: Yes, I can. I have already spoken about the increased capacity at visa application centres. I can also tell the House that work is taking place with the MOD in country and in region. For example, we know that one of the main surges is taking place in Poland. That is because Poland is on the frontline and bringing in people from Ukraine in huge numbers. We are supporting the Polish Government in many ways. With that, we will be working with the MOD teams already in Poland not only to surge staffing, but to look at what more we can do to provide wider humanitarian support for Ukrainian refugees in country.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Can the Home Secretary provide an update on the discussions with the Scottish Government on the intake of refugees from Ukraine and how many Scotland can home?

Priti Patel: Yes, I can. Discussions are ongoing, and there is a call taking place later today with the Scottish Government.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I was first on Tuesday and last on Thursday—it seems perfectly fair. I welcome what my right hon. Friend has done today with the new flexibilities, listening to what people have said up and down the country. Will she look at every practicality to speed up this system? Ukraine was a reliable country in producing its documentation, so can we have maximum flexibility in the documentation that people are able to provide? If they provide biometric and electronic data in another form—an identity card or something like that—we should accept that. A lot of elderly people will have never needed to renew their passports, and we should accept Ukrainian passports whether electronic or not. A simple thing: can we have enough translators if the forms have to be in English and enough people in post to answer queries, rather than asking people to go to the back of the queue when they get it wrong?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right on that. The documentation matter is constantly under review. Within the security context that I have spoken about, there are certain checks that can be done out of country and there are certain checks that will be done in the United Kingdom, as I outlined in my statement.

The point about translators is absolutely valid. Across the whole civil service across the United Kingdom, there has been a call for Ukrainian and Russian speakers to come forward for that very purpose—that took place some time ago. With that, of course, it is all about the

[Priti Patel]

simplification of process. We are non-stop in finding ways, many of them through digital and technology processes, so that people do not have to go to VACs. We are constantly looking at how else we can streamline the system. It is almost a blockchain approach here. We are going through that day in, day out, so I can give my hon. Friend that assurance.

Yvette Cooper: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) suggested that the Opposition Front Bench had said that we should throw away security checks, which has never been the case. On that basis, I will accept the apology that he put forward, if he confirms that apology.

Richard Fuller *indicated assent.*

Mr Speaker: Thanks for that.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Act:

Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Act 2022.

Business of the House

11.31 am

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mark Spencer): With pleasure. The business for the week commencing 14 March will include:

MONDAY 14 MARCH—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Bill, followed by remaining stages of the Professional Qualifications Bill [*Lords*], followed by remaining stages of the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill.

TUESDAY 15 MARCH—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by a general debate on Ukraine.

WEDNESDAY 16 MARCH—Opposition day (16th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the Scottish National party.

THURSDAY 17 MARCH—General debate on the Irish in Britain, followed by a general debate on protecting and restoring nature at COP15 and beyond. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 18 MARCH—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 21 March will include:

MONDAY 21 MARCH—Opposition day (17th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business.

On Tuesday, history was made in this House when Ukraine's President Zelensky addressed us. It was moving and inspirational. Yesterday, however, we saw new depths of Putin's depravity with the bombing of innocent women and children in a maternity hospital and the confirmed use of thermobaric bombs—war crimes. We must continue to reinforce our NATO allyship and urgently provide Ukraine with the assistance that it needs. The Government must also take the hardest possible sanctions approach against all those linked to Putin and all the dirty Russian money that has infiltrated our country.

We have worked with the Government to get the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill through this House as quickly as possible, but there are still some significant loopholes to close. Can the Leader of the House confirm that the Government will accept our amendment to reduce the transitional period from six months to 28 days? The Opposition have also tabled an amendment to close the loophole whereby a foreign entity can register a property with an uncontroversial beneficial owner, such as a spouse, change it to a more suspicious individual the following day but does not have to inform the register for 12 months. Can he confirm whether the Government will accept that amendment so that we can clean up that corruption together once and for all?

On this subject, I would also be grateful if the Leader of the House could confirm when part 2 of the economic crime legislation will come before us, including the measures on reforming Companies House that have been referred to. It cannot wait until the next Session. The Opposition will work with him and his colleagues to make sure that any such Bill progresses speedily, as we have done this week, so could he give us more information on that?

Tuesday was International Women's Day, and the Government's own survey showed that just 16% of small business employers and only one in three entrepreneurs are women. Women clearly hold the key to our economic recovery. The data on the companies that do have good gender diversity bears that out. As we come out of the pandemic, it is so important, so could the Leader of the House ask the Business Secretary to set out what steps he is taking to increase the number of women in business at all levels?

During the pandemic, social care staff were one of the groups on the frontline of our fight against covid, but vacancies currently being at an all-time high is leading to immense pressures for those already working in the sector. It has been brought to my attention that, this weekend, organisations in Derby—for instance, Disability Direct—are showing appreciation for their hard work and commemorating those who, sadly, lost their lives. Could the Leader of the House join me in praising social care staff in Derby and, of course, social care staff across the country?

As much as this Government try, we cannot ignore the worsening cost of living crisis. At a time of rocketing bills and stagnating wages that predate the Ukraine crisis, the Conservatives are choosing to increase national insurance—not back down—on working people and businesses at the worst possible time, which will hit 27 million workers. It leaves other forms of income, such as the buying and selling of property, and dealing in stocks and shares, untouched. Our Opposition day motion this week scrapping the planned rise was agreed by the House, so could the Leader of the House confirm that the Chancellor will not be pushing ahead with this disastrous Tory tax rise?

It is also time for the Government to look again at Labour's proposal for a one-off windfall tax on oil and gas. This would cut household energy bills by up to £600, enable the warm home discount scheme to be expanded and help those who need it most, including the nearly 13,000 households in the right hon. Gentleman's own constituency who would save up to £600 on their bills. Could the Leader of the House explain why his Government are forcing working people, including his own constituents, to pay the price for over a decade of Government dither, delay and incompetence?

Mark Spencer: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for a number of questions. Let us start with Ukraine and sanctions. I think she is right to draw attention not only to the President of Ukraine appearing on Tuesday, which was a momentous occasion, but the barbaric actions of the Putin regime yesterday, which I think struck new depths of barbarity. Attacking a maternity hospital cannot even be comprehended in a civil society. We should be under no illusion: this House is united in opposing Putin and his regime. We will not forget what they are doing and they will be held to account in a war crimes court at some point in the future. All those people acting on behalf of President Putin in conducting

these actions should be under no illusion: they will not escape justice either and we are united as a House of Commons in delivering that.

The hon. Lady asked about part 2 of the economic crime legislation. That is of course coming very soon. It will be in the next Session, which is not very far away. Certainly, the next Session will be upon us very soon, and it will be announced in the usual way from this Dispatch Box.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): What about now? Go on.

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman, from a sedentary position, tempts me to speculate, but the new Session will be announced in the usual way. The next economic crime Bill will be a key part of that, and it will be brought forward as rapidly as possible.

It was International Women's Day on Tuesday, and there will be an opportunity this afternoon to debate that matter. I agree with the hon. Lady that businesses that do not embrace half of the population in their economic output are missing out. Women in the United Kingdom make a huge economic contribution to the United Kingdom, and those businesses that are lacking in promoting that talent are missing out on half the talent available to them. They should reassess what they are doing.

I am delighted to join the hon. Lady in celebrating the work of social care staff not only in Derby, but across the country. I think people working in that industry contribute a great deal to society and they should be praised for the efforts that they are making.

The hon. Lady finished with the cost of living. We recognise that the effect of the Putin invasion of Ukraine is making huge ripples across energy markets and the whole world. That is clearly going to affect the United Kingdom. Luckily we are currently dependent on Russia for only 3% of our gas, but we can isolate ourselves from that moving forward. We need a balanced energy mix in the UK. We need to invest in our future and ensure that we have nuclear on tap as well as renewables. We need to move at a speed that our constituents and taxpayers can afford. The UK Government are committed to doing that.

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): Crops destroyed, livestock killed, farm equipment stolen: that is the reality of hare coursing for farmers in west Berkshire. One of them recently described it to me as a form of "rural terrorism." My right hon. Friend knows about this issue probably better than anyone in the House, so will he commit to a debate in Government time to discuss the true misery that those crimes inflict and better ways of tackling them?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is right to draw the House's attention to this matter. It is an issue that is worthy of debate. My only disappointment is that I would not be able to participate in that debate myself. Hare coursing has been illegal since the passage of the Hunting Act 2004 and it remains a cause of concern in rural areas. During consideration of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill last week, we strengthened the measures on hare coursing, but it is damaging to rural communities where it takes place. I encourage her to seek a Westminster Hall debate on that important issue and I wish her well.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson, Pete Wishart.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): As the darkening situation in Ukraine continues into a third week, it is right that statements, legislation and debates to help with the response continue to take priority in the business of the House. I hope the Leader of the House will assure me that that will continue to be the case. Although there is a general, if rather unusual, consensus across the House, that of course breaks down, as we have just heard, when it comes to the situation of and the support required for refugees. We welcome the belated U-turns, but this is still a Government with an ingrained ideological, if not obsessive determination to keep people out. We will see how it all works out in the days ahead.

Can we have a statement on how this will affect children leaving Ukraine—children who have no documentation and cannot wait a week to get out? Usually, I raise a constituency case at business questions. My constituent, Steve Carr, is the chair of Dnipro Kids Appeal, which supports orphans in that central Ukrainian city—a city in the crosshairs of all the approaches from the Russian advance. Right now, he is crossing the Ukrainian-Polish border with 34 Ukrainian orphans, hoping to get to Scotland. Indeed, he has just sent me a photo of the coach with the 34 Ukrainian orphans in it. Those children are traumatised and exhausted after weeks of seeing their country invaded and bombed. Steve does not anticipate any difficulty in getting across that border, but even after the Home Secretary's statement, he does not know what happens next and how we get those children to Scotland. There are places for them in Perthshire and they will be supported by the local community there. I have written to the Home Secretary. I have not yet received a response—I know she is busy—but can the Leader of the House assure me that all remaining bureaucracy will now be set aside in the name of doing the right thing for those children to get here?

As you will know, Mr Speaker, the number of covid cases is up again in this House. Given the abandonment of nearly all arrangements in here, that was as inevitable as it was certain to happen. So what is the Leader of the House going to do about it? I suppose he will do what this Government and this House do best when confronted by a rise of cases in this pandemic—next to absolutely nothing.

Mark Spencer: First, I recognise the support of the SNP in dealing with Putin and his regime, and standing together. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the fact that he slightly disagrees with the Government's approach to refugees. We have just had an hour questioning the Home Secretary, who responded at the Dispatch Box, setting out how the Government are to open humanitarian routes for people coming from Ukraine, to settle not only in Scotland but across the UK. The UK should be enormously proud that we are open-armed to welcome people from that desperate situation. I wish the hon. Gentleman's constituent, Steve Carr, all the best. He is clearly doing great work and he is an example of volunteers who are putting themselves in harm's way to support people in that desperate situation in Ukraine. I applaud him for his efforts. I will follow up the hon. Gentleman's letter with the Home Secretary and ensure that he gets a speedy response.

On covid, I think we should recognise that the Government have played the pandemic better than most western countries. We were the first to issue the vaccine and the first to start rolling out the booster programme. We now have the fastest growing economy in the G7. It is time to recognise that, fortunately, omicron is not as dangerous as other strains of covid, and it is time to move on, try to get back to a bit of normality and get the economy going again.

Finally, before I sit down, I recognise that yesterday was a significant day for the hon. Gentleman—he had a large-numbered birthday. I know that the SNP has been debating how pensions will be paid in future, and the best way for him to ensure his pension is to remain a member of the United Kingdom. I trust that he will campaign to do that.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Leader of the House knows my woke credentials, so will he make a statement next week on the need for certain contextual information to be provided under portraits in Speaker's House?

Mark Spencer: I recognise my right hon. Friend's woke credentials. My hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell), who I cannot see in his place, is Chairman of the Speaker's Advisory Committee on Works of Art, and he has commented that the Committee will reflect on portraits in the House. However, as Leader of the House, I am committed to ensuring that there is no place for bullying or harassment in Parliament and that people can have confidence in the systems and processes that we have put in place. My predecessors, including my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), worked hard to ensure that everyone working in Parliament is treated with dignity and respect.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement on the growing humanitarian crisis on the Ukrainian border and, in particular, reports that black and Asian people, including students from India and African countries, have been stopped from leaving Ukraine at the border? It would be helpful to hear from a Foreign Office Minister about what engagement the UK is having with our allies in the region to ensure that all refugees who need to leave Ukraine can do so regardless of the colour of their skin.

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady raises a very important issue. If that is true, it is shocking, and I will ensure that the Foreign Secretary hears of her comments and investigates the matter. Any form of racism should be called out, and as the United Kingdom we must make every effort to ensure that. I will take the matter up on her behalf with the Foreign Secretary.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Can I have a debate on Soot Hill road in my constituency? It links the villages of Barnton, Comberbach and Anderton to Northwich, and adjacent to it is a busy industrial park. Back in January 2021, during Storm Christoph, there was a landslip and the edge of the road gave way. However, for 13 months, the road has been closed, causing huge upset to local residents, business and visitors, and now

rumour has it that Cheshire West and Chester Council is kicking the repairs down the road for another 18 months, which would be absolutely unacceptable.

Mark Spencer: Local highways authorities have a duty to maintain the highway network in their areas, and Cheshire West and Chester Council has a responsibility for the maintenance of Soot Hill road. As announced at the spending review, we are investing more than £5 billion over the Parliament in local highways maintenance. However, it seems to me that my right hon. Friend has been let down by Labour, and I hope that her council heard her message. It needs to get on with those repairs as rapidly as possible.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Agriculture is extraordinarily important in my constituency. Let me give two examples of the problems that my farmers and crofters face: one is the forthcoming price hike in red diesel; another is that the seed potato growers in my constituency, who are some of the best in the UK, are having extraordinary trouble accessing overseas markets. I know that it is difficult for the Leader of the House to comment on this because of his background, but does he agree that a debate on UK agriculture would be timely and extremely helpful to farmers?

Mark Spencer: I draw attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. This Government take food security very seriously. The good news is that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is across the threat that we face, and there is no prospect of food shortages at any point in the future. DEFRA is working with the Treasury to try to make sure that that continues to be the case, but I fully understand the hon. Gentleman's point. It is worthy of further debate, and he may want to apply for an Adjournment debate or even a debate in Westminster Hall.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): For too many in Stockton South, the dream of moving into their new home has become a nightmare because they bought a new-build house from Avant Homes. Time and again, Avant over-promises and under-delivers, operating a grab-and-run approach. It is happy to take people's life savings but unwilling to engage with me or my residents on its half-built, half-baked housing developments. Will my right hon. Friend grant a debate on irresponsible housing developers? And may I join the call for a statement on the behaviour of the former Speaker?

Mark Spencer: I do not know whether hon. Members are allowed two business questions, but my hon. Friend managed to sneak two in there. He is clearly a huge champion for his constituents. Those who are fortunate to be housing developers have a responsibility to their customers to make sure that the properties they build reach the required specifications and are fit for housing. There are authorities out there that hold to account rogue landlords or those who are making products that are not fit for purpose, and I encourage him to engage with them.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency still has significant backlogs. A number of constituents have applications stuck in the system and they are spending hours on the phone. This

is not just inconvenient but is impacting on people's livelihoods. A man who needs to send off medical records yearly has sent in his evidence—he works as a minibus driver—but he is still waiting, and it is often not clear whether people can still drive while they are waiting. Can we have a statement in Government time on the action that they will take on the DVLA backlog?

Mark Spencer: I, too, have constituents who have suffered from slow responses from the DVLA. The hon. Lady will recognise that, during the pandemic, there was an outbreak of covid in the DVLA at Swansea, which caused a number of problems. However, there was also substantial industrial action from the unions, which caused huge backlogs, and the Secretary of State for Transport has been working hard to resolve them. I encourage her, through her connections, to talk to the unions to make sure that no further industrial action takes place.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): Stroud is going through a local plan process now so, sadly, we will not benefit from the Government's forthcoming transformational planning reforms, yet constituents in Cam, Sharpness, Berkeley, Wisloe and other areas are coming to my surgeries in droves because they are really concerned about the plan consultation, and they are worried that councils are trying to build even more homes than required and about many other issues. Will my right hon. Friend consider asking for a statement from the new Minister for Housing on what can be done to help areas such as mine that are going through the local plan process now, and what other considerations we can act on to help our particularly rural areas?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is a huge champion for her constituents. Although the planning system is a key enabler of the Government's wider mission to level up across the country and regenerate left-behind places, I will pass her comments on to the new Housing Minister. The previous Housing Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher), who is in his place, made huge strides in the right direction to make sure that we get the right homes built in the right places and that we protect our green and open spaces.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The cost of living crisis is affecting everyone in the United Kingdom. In Northern Ireland, it is accentuated by our having fuel costs that are 27% higher, and higher transport and haulage costs, which impact on every household. Will the Government address that issue by urgently introducing legislation or taking action to cut fuel costs across the whole United Kingdom immediately? Will they also address the obvious problems that are coming down the tracks fast, which could include food security issues as a result of grain shortages? Will they set aside land across the UK now for next year's harvest?

Mark Spencer: Matters of taxation and fuel duty would be addressed at a Budget, and at some point my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will make his Spring statement, but the Government recognise the challenge in global oil and gas prices. We are seeking to mitigate it, and I know that the hon. Gentleman will be in his place to question Treasury Ministers when they next appear at the Dispatch Box.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the Standards Committee report on the conduct of the former Speaker John Bercow. The scale of the bullying behaviour that it describes is horrific and it must not happen again. Will my right hon. Friend commit to making a statement in the House on the report and the Government's response to it? Furthermore, my right hon. Friend will be mindful of records of Mr Bercow's tenure such as the large portrait that hangs in this building. Further to my point of order on Tuesday, I ask my right hon. Friend to do all he can to ensure that they are set in context, with an explanatory pack alongside such paintings, because the victims of his bullying may see them as they walk around the place.

Mark Spencer: First and foremost, the safety of those who work on the estate is paramount. There is no place for bullying or harassment in Parliament, and by working across parties, we will ensure that everyone working in Parliament is treated with dignity and respect. The Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme aims to improve the working culture within Parliament, and I hope that the report shows that people can have confidence to proceed with any complaint that they have, and that anyone guilty of such crimes will be held to account.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): While, understandably, the focus is on Ukraine, it is important that we do not forget other parts of the world, especially where our citizens are being unjustly detained. My constituent Luke Symons has been detained by the Houthis in Sana'a in Yemen since 4 April 2017 simply for possessing a British passport. The Foreign Secretary has still not agreed to meet Luke's grandfather Bob Cummings, who has been campaigning; and Amnesty International has joined the campaign. May we have a debate about British citizens who are held unjustly overseas? I have applied for one in Westminster Hall; I do not know if I will be lucky. Can we have one in Government time?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw the attention of the House to this matter. He is a courageous campaigner on behalf of his constituent. We are working closely with our partners in the region to make sure that Mr Symons is released and reunited with his family as soon as possible, but I will make sure that the Foreign Office is aware of the hon. Gentleman's concerns and comments.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I wonder if the Leader of the House might sponsor a review of the timetabling of oral parliamentary questions. A number of Departments such as the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which I am proud to serve, only ever feature on a Thursday, but 40 minutes is not really long enough, and this morning a number of Members were disappointed that they were not called. They had lots to discuss. Will my right hon. Friend please agree to address the imbalance?

Mark Spencer: That is something that the Procedure Committee may well want to consider at some point in the future. My hon. Friend will understand that extending any question session has a knock-on effect on business later that day or on the rota of which Departments

appear at the Dispatch Box. It is worthy of review and perhaps the Procedure Committee would like to look at it at some point in the future.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): West Midlands Ambulance Service staff experienced 1,671 incidents of physical and verbal abuse in 2021 compared with 887 in 2016. That is a shocking 88% increase in just five years. Across England, 11,749 ambulance staff were abused last year. Staff have been stabbed, punched, kicked, head-butted, spat at and verbally abused. In response to these abhorrent attacks, the national work without fear campaign has launched to highlight the profound impact of this abuse and encourage respect for our brave and dedicated ambulance staff. Will the Leader of the House join me in condemning this heinous abuse and look for a time for a debate so that we can reinforce the message that abusive behaviour of any form is totally unacceptable and must stop?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady is right: it beggars belief that anyone would attack a person who is working in the ambulance service to save a life or make someone better, or would attack members of the fire brigade, who I know are sometimes attacked while they are fighting fires and trying to save property and people's lives. This is an abhorrent crime, and the House will have noted the hon. Lady's concern. The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill will strengthen some of the measures taken against people who commit such crimes, and I hope she will be in the Lobby to support that Bill as it makes its way through Parliament.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Each year we have an emotional debate on Holocaust Memorial Day, and we are indebted to the Holocaust Educational Trust and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust for all the work that they do, but that debate commemorates the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Today is the anniversary of the creation of the first concentration camp in Germany by the Nazis in 1933. May we have a debate in Government time on the history of the holocaust? Only by learning the lessons of what happened will we prevent it from happening again.

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important matter. The holocaust is something that we must never forget, and an awareness of its history is vital to ensuring that such horrors never happen again. My hon. Friend may know that the National Holocaust Centre is in the constituency of my right hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick). It is certainly worth a visit, and many schoolchildren are invited and go there.

I know that my hon. Friend is a member of the Backbench Business Committee. As he says, we hold regular debates in the Chamber to mark Holocaust Memorial Day in January, which are always well subscribed. I would encourage him to apply for a Westminster Hall or Adjournment debate to raise the matter to which he has referred today.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I do not know whether the Leader of the House has seen my early-day motion 31.

[That this House notes the work of WAVE Trust and its 70/30 campaign to reduce levels of child abuse, neglect and domestic abuse by 70 per cent by 2030; further notes

that over two-thirds of this House have endorsed that campaign, including a majority from all parties; recognises the role that Adverse Childhood Experiences play in the entrenchment of intergenerational health and income inequalities and the loss of over £20 billion per year to the UK economy; welcomes the publication of the Early Years Review; and calls on the Government to adopt a comprehensive early years' strategy to prevent harm to children before it happens, ensuring that all parents are supported to give children the best possible start in life.]

The early-day motion, entitled “Giving every child the best start in life”, has just become the most signed EDM in this Parliament. I commend the work of the WAVE Trust and its 70/30 campaign to reduce childhood trauma by at least 70% by the year 2030. Given that more than 500 Members on both sides of the House are supporting that campaign, is it not time we had a debate on this vital issue, and gave reducing childhood trauma the attention that it deserves?

Mark Spencer: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her success with the early-day motion. I agree that this is an important issue, and that it is worthy of debate. If 500 of the hon. Lady's colleagues are supporting her EDM, she should have no problem in securing a Backbench Business debate on the matter, or a Westminster Hall debate if she needs longer.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): The long-awaited report on maternity deaths and injuries at Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust was due to be published on 22 March, but families in Telford have now been informed that its publication has been delayed. I understand that the delay will be short, but the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), had been due to give a statement to the House following the report's publication, and I fear that the publication may now be pushed into the Easter recess and Members will not have an opportunity to put questions to the Minister. Please will the Leader of the House urge the Minister to ensure that the publication of this important report takes place before the recess?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is a tenacious campaigner on this issue. The Department of Health and Social Care is working apace to secure a new date for the report's publication. It has informed me that it expects that to be days rather than weeks later than the original date, and I understand that the Minister has written to all local MPs to update them on the position. She is also happy to meet local MPs to discuss it with them personally. I will ensure that she hears my hon. Friend's question today.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I presume that the Lords amendments referred to for Tuesday will be amendments to the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill. The Leader of the House is not nodding yet, but I am sure that that is the case, because it is the only legislation that is waiting. If it is the case, can the Leader of the House explain something to me?

The Foreign Affairs Committee was told earlier this week, both by the Foreign Secretary and by other people, that Foreign Office officials knew as early as 2019 that the sanctions regime we had introduced in 2018 would simply not be fast enough or easy enough to use in the event of a situation such as the one we have

today. Why on earth did the Government not do something about it much earlier? I am delighted that Roman Abramovich and Deripaska have been sanctioned today, but, to be honest, I think that they should have been sanctioned several years ago. Are we going to tackle those who have acted as proxies for these people, such as Greg Barker, Arron Banks and Ben Elliot? Are we going to sanction all those who have acted as proxies? Are we going to sanction Belarusians such as Dmitry Mazepin who have been actively supporting the invasion in Ukraine? I think the whole House wants to take a full and united approach to this, but it worries us that the UK sanctioned seven people today whereas all 27 countries of the European Union sanctioned 160 yesterday.

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman will note that in the business statement I said that on 15 March, if necessary, there would be consideration of Lords amendments, after which we would move on to a general debate. Returning to sanctions, we are now in a place where we have the most robust sanctions regime in place and where we can take action against some of the individuals that he named. He acknowledges that we are taking action. Today, we have announced sanctions against two individuals—

Chris Bryant: Seven.

Mark Spencer: Two that he named and five others. I do not think it is helpful to have a running commentary on individual names in this Chamber, but he can rest assured that the United Kingdom is taking action and will continue to take action, and that we will be robust in those sanctions.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I hate to think what is happening in Ukraine today. It is almost unbelievable, but it has achieved one thing: in all my time here, I have never seen the House more united or better informed. That is partly due to Mr Speaker granting urgent questions and the address by the President of Ukraine, but it is also due the way in which those on the Opposition Benches have performed, and of course the leadership from the Prime Minister on this has been superb. May I also thank the Leader of the House? I cannot remember a time when Ministers have come to this House so regularly to update it and to answer the questions that they have been asked—

Chris Bryant: What?

Mr Bone: They have answered the questions they have been asked. I just want to ask one other thing. If something dreadful happens in the next few days before Parliament comes back on Monday, would the Leader of the House be willing to recommend recalling Parliament?

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments about the importance of a united House of Commons in sending the strongest possible message to the Putin regime that we will not tolerate his war crimes and his invasion of Ukraine. My hon. Friend also recognised that a series of Ministers from different Departments have been at this Dispatch Box to ensure that the House is informed and that Members have the opportunity to engage with them to ask their direct questions. I see no reason why that will not continue. We will continue to keep the House updated on a regular basis from this Dispatch Box.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Leader of the House spoke of the impact of Russia's dreadful invasion of Ukraine on oil and gas prices, but we are also seeing global food markets being dramatically affected as Ukraine's agricultural production levels are heavily disrupted. Farmers in Scotland and the UK are seeing seed, feed, fertiliser and transport costs rocketing, and the seasonal window for any ramping up of domestic food production is tightening. Food prices are rising for our constituents and people across the world. Can we have a debate in Government time on the subject of food security at UK level but also, crucially, at global level?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady is right to draw the House's attention to this matter. I think she will join me in recognising that in the United Kingdom—in Scotland and across the UK—we have some of the greatest farmers in the world. Their efficiency and—[*Interruption.*] You never know how far away you are from an efficient farmer—they are everywhere! UK farmers have kept this nation fed very well since the second world war. We have had food security in this country for a very long time and I see no reason why that will not continue, but this is a matter of importance and worthy of further debate.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): My amazing constituent Sy Hughes, who runs the Fitness Bank in Oswaldtwistle, has taken on the unimaginable by walking from Manchester to the Eiffel Tower in Paris to raise money for the Bleakholt animal sanctuary. He is currently on his last day and is due to arrive tonight. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking and congratulating Sy Hughes, and will he allow a debate in Government time on how the Government support charities such as the one Sy is raising money for?

Mark Spencer: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating her constituent. She did not make it clear whether the finish line is at the top or the bottom of the Eiffel tower, but I hope her constituent makes it to the very top. Bleakholt animal sanctuary has saved thousands of animals' lives since Maudie the donkey was saved by its founder, Olive Lomas, back in the 1950s. It is right that people like Mr Hughes help to support the sanctuary's continuing work, and I wish him all the best in finishing at the top of the Eiffel tower later today.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): A large, privately owned building with dodgy scaffolding has stood derelict at the bottom of Lawe Road in South Shields for years. It is an eyesore and it is dangerous. Brian Walker, who lives nearby, asked the Health and Safety Executive to come and assess the building, but the HSE advised that, because people are not working on the building, there is nothing it can do. The council is also completely powerless to act. Can the Leader of the House explain why, under this Government, private developers are allowed to treat local communities in this way?

Mark Spencer: Clearly there are planning regulations in place, and I do not know whether they apply to long-term scaffolding. Her constituent, Mr Walker, clearly has concerns about the building, and I will pass on the hon. Lady's comments to the Secretary of State for

Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to make sure he is aware of her concerns. She is right to highlight the building today.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Independent Expert Panel report published on Tuesday shames all of us who were prepared to put up with the behaviour contained in its pages for so long. Does the Leader of the House agree that serial bullying and serial lying have no place in this mother of Parliaments, and that we must have a parliamentary outing at the soonest opportunity so that those who were prepared to eulogise the former Speaker so royally upon his departure have an opportunity to refresh the House on their position?

Mark Spencer: Of course I agree that bullying and harassment have no place in this House or on the parliamentary estate. The Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme report to which he refers makes it clear that, no matter a person's position—however high their status—they will be held to account by the system we have in place if they are guilty of harassment and bullying. That should give victims huge confidence to come forward and make a complaint.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Fuel duty has remained at around 58p a litre for the last 12 years, but consumers also pay 20% VAT, which is just under 12p a litre. Consumers pay tax on the tax, which means they actually pay almost 70p tax on every litre. That is before the costs of extraction, purchase, shipment and forecourt sales are added. The Treasury is raking in 20% VAT on the total cost at forecourts, with fuel price increases bringing in additional VAT amounting to billions of pounds, which is helping to accelerate inflation.

As the price of a litre of fuel is now reaching £1.80 and is set to rise further, will the Leader of the House make a statement on his support for an immediate reduction in the VAT charged on fuel to help motorists and businesses, and to try to keep inflation in single figures?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady will be aware that she has an opportunity next week to question the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he is at the Dispatch Box for Treasury questions. There has been no increase in fuel duty for 12 years, which is a huge commitment by this Government to support hard-working families who have to fill up their car. It was the right thing to do, but it is worthy of further debate.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): May I apologise to Mr Speaker and the Leader of the House for my inability to attend the Chamber in a timely manner for business questions? I am speaking not about today, of course, but about last Thursday when, like millions of other Londoners, I was inconvenienced by a very small number of people from the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers. Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Transport in Cabinet to designate the London underground as an essential service so that, in future years, we cannot be subjected to these strikes by a very small number of people for no real reason?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the misery caused by that strike action. I recall that the present Mayor of London made a promise

when first seeking election to have zero days of strikes—another promise he has failed to deliver, in stark contrast to his predecessor as Mayor. For many people, the tube network is an essential service. By not standing up to union barons, the Mayor of London has shown whose side he is on. The Secretary of State for Transport tweeted:

“Having funded TfL to the tune of £5bn to protect jobs & London’s transport system throughout Covid, it’s a kick in the teeth for Londoners to suffer from @RMTunion strikes.”

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): As we see the horrors unfolding in Ukraine, people across the United Kingdom have opened their hearts. In my constituency, people have offered their homes, food parcels and clothes parcels, and they have offered to use their light goods vehicles to carry goods across to Poland, but it is not clear what is happening with the humanitarian support scheme. The Home Secretary confirmed earlier that the scheme will be led by Lord Harrington and will be split between the Home Office and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Can we have clarity as soon as possible from the Leader of the House, or from a Minister in the Commons, on what is happening with the scheme so that my constituents, and constituents right across the UK, can understand how to access the scheme to provide support to desperate Ukrainians?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the huge compassion and hard work of constituents across the country. As he identifies, Lord Harrington has just taken up his role and is getting to grips with the situation, and he will come forward with his proposals in due course. I will make sure that both the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary are aware of the hon. Gentleman’s comments and respond to him in due course.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): Following this week’s damning report on the bullying of hard-working members of House staff, will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on this important topic?

Mark Spencer: A number of similar questions have been asked this morning. This is clearly a topic that the House may want to debate, and I encourage my hon. Friend to apply for an Adjournment debate or even a Westminster Hall debate, given the enthusiasm we have seen this morning.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I associate myself with the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). We do not often agree, but I agree with his comments.

Universities are important to our economy, particularly in empowering regional economies. The Higher Education Commission is today launching, “Empowering Innovation: The role of universities in boosting regional economies.” If the Leader of the House joins us in the Attlee Suite at half-past 1, I will be very happy to buy him a glass of orange juice.

Mark Spencer: If I am honest, I am slightly disappointed with the hon. Gentleman’s question. I thought he would congratulate Nottingham Forest on defeating Huddersfield Town in the FA cup earlier in the week.

The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the great work of our education facilities across the UK in helping young people to move from education into careers. University is one option available to the next generation in their pursuit of a great career, and we should be enormously proud of the great education establishments we have in the United Kingdom.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): It was positive to learn this morning of a reduction in bureaucracy for Ukrainian refugees. Can we have a debate on how local communities can best welcome and support refugees when they arrive? What resources will the Government provide to help them do that? The spontaneous and significant outpouring of support shows the generosity of the British people.

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to this, and I am sure the people of Harrogate will be as warm and welcoming as people in other parts of the country. The House will continue to be updated by Ministers on progress as we encourage and embrace people coming to the UK from a very desperate situation. I know the British people will continue with their compassion and support.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Carol and William Dowson emailed me this morning about their problems in accessing GP appointments and the fact that people ended up in hospital because they could not get to see a GP early enough. In my recent survey of constituents, 58% of respondents found it difficult to book an appointment with a GP and a majority waited for more than a week. Hull has the highest number of patients per GP in England. The national average is 2,000 whereas in Hull the average is 2,600. May we have a debate on what the Government are going to do about the “under-doctoring” of Hull and how my constituents can access GPs more easily?

Mark Spencer: Unfortunately, the right hon. Lady will not have the opportunity to question the Health Secretary until after the Easter recess, but I know that access to GP surgeries is an issue of concern across the House. There is definitely a challenge in a post-covid world in enabling our constituents to access GP surgeries. I know that the Health Secretary takes that very seriously, but I will make sure that he is aware of her comments and responds to her in due course.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Phillips 66 refinery in my constituency is Europe’s largest producer of high-grade petroleum coke, which is an essential component of batteries. At the moment, that coke is exported to the far east and then re-imported into the UK as the finished article. May we have a statement from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to clarify our policy and explain how we are going to onshore that production?

Mark Spencer: The Government have a long-standing and comprehensive programme of support for the UK automotive sector. I understand that the Business Secretary spoke to people from the Phillips 66 refinery this week. As part of our net zero strategy, the Government announced a further £350 million to the automotive transformation fund over the next three years to support the development

[Mark Spencer]

of an international and comprehensive electric vehicle supply chain here in the UK. That is additional to the £500 million announced as part of the Prime Minister's 10-point plan in November 2020.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): May we please have an urgent statement on rising fuel and energy costs, and their impact on rural areas? Prices have increased substantially in recent weeks. Some constituents have seen their heating oil bills more than treble this year, and others have simply been told that no deliveries are available to them. We have all now grown accustomed to seeing pump prices increase by some 10p or 20p a litre in a matter of days. Ceredigion is especially vulnerable to such price hikes, as it has areas where more than 80% of homes are off the mains gas grid and, sadly, a lack of public transport infrastructure means that we have a greater dependence on car use for essential journeys. So may we have an urgent statement on the possibility of introducing temporary rebate schemes to help alleviate some of this cost?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the global energy price hikes, which will have an impact here in the UK. I know that the UK taxpayer has benefited and will continue to benefit from the freezing of fuel duty, which the Chancellor of the Exchequer has been able to keep in place for the whole of this Government's time in office, but I recognise the challenge that rural areas face. The hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity to ask the Chancellor about this next week at Treasury questions, should he be in his place.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): The independent expert panel findings on Tuesday should be a source of shame, most obviously to Mr John Bercow himself, but also to this House; to its policies and procedures, which we have reformed; and to a number of Members, former and current, who turned a blind eye because it suited them politically to do so. May we please have a statement in which we can raise all of these issues and, furthermore, a general debate on bullying in the workplace?

Mark Spencer: I know that my hon. Friend will be disappointed with some of that report's findings, but we should also be enormously proud that the system we have in place holds people to account, and gives confidence to victims to come forward and confidence that their allegations or concerns will be addressed. Clearly, this is a topic that people want to talk about, and I encourage him to apply for an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The growing realities of the cost of living crisis are being felt across the UK. I have received lots of communication from constituents who are particularly concerned about the benefit cap, which is making the squeeze even tougher. The cap particularly discriminates against women in single parent families and families from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. Will the Leader of the House schedule a debate in Government time on the need to remove the benefit cap?

Mark Spencer: I say to the hon. Lady that the best way out of poverty is through work, and what the Chancellor of the Exchequer has been able to do is adjust the taper effect on those who are receiving universal credit so that the harder they work and the more they work, the more of the cash they are able to keep. That is the right approach, so that work pays and people are able to aspire to better careers and more cash in their pocket, which they are able to keep through less taxation.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the serious deficiencies in the postal service? In the past two weeks alone, 64 Chalkwell residents have expressed concerns about Royal Mail, including the late delivery of hospital letters, and businesses finding letters and items going missing. Residents and businesses in my constituency rely on Royal Mail to recover from the pandemic, and its poor service is having an impact on lives and livelihoods.

Mark Spencer: The Government recognise the importance of a reliable post service to local communities across the UK. Ofcom, as the independent regulator responsible for the delivery of the universal postal service, monitors Royal Mail's performance and has powers to investigate and take enforcement action if Royal Mail fails to achieve its service delivery targets. I know that Royal Mail pays close attention to Members' questions in this Chamber, and I encourage it to take inspiration from my hon. Friend's short time in this House and keep delivering for the people of Southend.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As everyone knows, this week we had International Women's Day. In my work as chair of the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief, I repeatedly hear of the double trauma that women and girls face if their religious or belief group suffers persecution—it is rampant across the world. In response to a recent article by Open Doors printed in *Christian Today*, I wonder whether the Leader of the House will provide time for a statement on what more could be done to better address the needs of vulnerable Christian women left behind in Syria, who could not flee the war and continue to live without full realisation of their human dignity.

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight this issue, and I pay tribute to his work; he is a long-standing campaigner on these issues of religious freedom and those who are persecuted around the world. I would give him advice on how to be heard in this Chamber, but he is the master of getting across his message in this Chamber, and I wish him well in continuing to deliver.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): As chair of the all-party kidney group, I would also like to wish all the best to people celebrating World Kidney Day and raising awareness. I wish to add my voice to the calls for a discussion on bullying in the workplace, which is an incredibly serious issue regarding the former Speaker of this House. I would like to go away from that uncontrollable explosion of negative energy and move to something a little more positive: clean, cheap, renewable, positive energy. Of course, I refer to the STEP—Spherical Tokamak for Energy Production—fusion project, which we want to

bring to Bassetlaw and West Burton A. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the STEP project and, ideally, bringing it to north Nottinghamshire?

Mark Spencer: Asking three questions is probably testing the patience of the Deputy Speaker. Fusion is potentially a world-changing energy source, which could help to sustain a low-carbon economy of the future. More widely, we are increasing research and development, spending £22 billion by 2026—this is the fastest ever uplift. At the spending review, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced £120 million for advanced nuclear technologies, through the future nuclear enabling fund. I encourage my hon. Friend to continue championing West Burton at every opportunity so that it can benefit from this investment.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): The Amazing Graze charity in Blackpool is leading the way in tackling homelessness with an innovative project of converting a double-decker bus into a mobile shelter for those sleeping rough. This Government have a brilliant record of reducing homelessness, but clearly there is more we can do. May we have a debate in Government time on how we can work with charities such as Amazing Graze to tackle homelessness and meet our ambitious target to eradicate it for good?

Mark Spencer: I congratulate my hon. Friend, his constituents and all those involved in the Amazing Grace project. The Government have a good record in reducing homelessness and the number of those who find themselves sleeping rough. I encourage my hon. Friend to apply for an Adjournment debate so that he can draw the House's attention to his constituents' excellent work.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Mr Yoon Suk-yeol on his victory overnight in the presidential elections in the Republic of Korea? Does he agree that from South Korea to Taiwan, India, Ghana, Canada and Japan, free people around the world choose democracy? Will he find time for a debate in the House on the importance of defending democracy around the world?

Mark Spencer: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating President Yoon. We have great friends in South Korea. The importance of a democratic society has never been more apparent to the House than at this

current moment in history. Our friends in South Korea are an important part of democratic society and I congratulate President Yoon on his success.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): The issues raised in the independent report on the behaviour of the former Speaker that was published earlier this week risk dragging the reputation of this House into the mud. The continued support of some Members on the Opposition Benches is a source of shame—

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): He was a Tory MP.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): You could have fooled me!

Mark Jenkinson: It is important that the House sends a message to my constituents in Workington and to everyone throughout the country that it will not tolerate bullying and misogyny like that again. I echo the calls for a debate in Government time or, indeed, a statement from the Leader of the House on those matters.

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is one of several colleagues who have called for such a debate; I encourage him to link up with the others to secure such a debate. We should have pride and confidence in the system we have in place. Those who commit harassment or bullying will be held to account and those who have been victims should have the confidence that the system is in place to hold people to account.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): Last week, London was plunged into chaos, with two days of tubes strikes and four days of transport affected, even though the Mayor of London had promised zero days of strikes. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the current Mayor of London is failing Londoners, whether it be on transport, policing or building affordable housing, and that my constituents deserve better?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord), she is right to draw the House's attention to the current London Mayor. Tube strikes bring misery to commuters and people trying to work in London. As my hon. Friend highlights, those strikes came on the back of a promise to have zero days of strike. London is being let down by its current Mayor.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Leader of the House for his business statement.

National Shipbuilding Strategy

12.33 pm

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin):

With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on behalf of my colleague the Secretary of State for Defence and shipbuilding tsar, concerning the Government's refresh of the national shipbuilding strategy.

The United Kingdom is a great maritime nation and shipbuilding runs in our blood. At the turn of the previous century, Britain built 60% of the world's ships and, although we are no longer the world's workshop, our shipbuilding industry remains a global leader in design and technology. It brings in billions to our economy and spreads wealth right across our country. Today, our maritime manufacturers are responsible for the state-of-the-art research vessel the RSS Sir David Attenborough, and for constructing the most powerful surface ships ever built in Britain: the Queen Elizabeth-class carriers.

More than 42,600 people from Appledore to Rosyth owe their livelihoods to our shipbuilding industry, but we still need to strengthen its resilience. It is worth reminding ourselves that even in the digital age, some 95% of UK trade by volume, and 90% by value, is carried by sea. Given this dependence, it is vital that we continue to safeguard our access to global maritime trade, even as we open up our sails and seek out new markets and new sustainable technologies. That is why, in 2019, the Prime Minister appointed the Defence Secretary as the shipbuilding tsar. Since then, he has been working tirelessly across Government to make our shipbuilding sector more productive, competitive, innovative and ambitious.

There has been real progress. Not only do we have much greater cross-Whitehall and industry co-operation, but we are doubling Ministry of Defence shipbuilding investment over the life of this Parliament to more than £1.7 billion a year. We have committed to procuring a formidable future fleet, including up to five Type 32 frigates, alongside the Type 31 and Type 26 programmes. We will grow our fleet of frigates and destroyers over the current number of 19 by the end of the decade. We have launched a competition to build a national flagship—the first ship of its kind to be built and commissioned in Britain—and last September we opened up the National Shipbuilding Office, a pan-governmental organisation that reports directly to the shipbuilding inter-ministerial group, is chaired by the shipbuilding tsar and is driving transformative change across our organisation.

Today, I am delighted to announce that we are going one step further by publishing our refreshed national shipbuilding strategy. Drawing on the multi-talented skills of the Government, industry and academia, and backed up by more than £5 billion of Government investment over the next three years, the plan creates the framework for our future UK maritime success.¹ It contains five essential elements. First, it radically extends the scope of our existing shipbuilding strategy. I may be standing here as a Defence Minister, but rest assured that the plan is as much about commercial shipbuilding as it is about the Royal Navy. We are focused not simply on hulls alone but on internal systems and sub-systems.

Secondly, we are establishing a 30-year shipbuilding pipeline of more than 150 vessels, thereby offering a clear demand signal in respect of our future requirements. We

know that a regular drumbeat of design and manufacturing work is vital not just to maintain our critical national security capabilities but to drive the efficiencies that reduce longer-term cost. We are not just giving suppliers confidence in industry order books; we are going to give them greater clarity about our requirements, too. Today, we set out our policy and technology priorities, from net zero commitments to social-value requirements.

We are determined to ensure that our vast shipbuilding programmes leave a lasting legacy that goes beyond the procurement of a new vessel for the Border Force or the latest battle-winning warships, so we have made it a key requirement for shipbuilders to take account of social value, thereby ensuring not only that we deliver the capabilities that each Department needs but that taxpayers' money is used to maximum effect. We support jobs, skills and investment and will establish a new social value minimum of 20% for competitions for Royal Navy vessels.

Thirdly, our strategy will accelerate innovation, enabling shipwrights and supply chains to unlock new manufacturing, production and clean maritime technologies. In recent times, the automotive industry has blazed a trail in the field of sustainability, investing in everything from electric to hydrogen and ammonia fuel technologies. But domestic shipping accounts for more emissions than the bus and rail sector combined, so when it comes to decarbonisation, it is high time that we made sure shipping does not end up in the slow lane.

In 2019, the Department for Transport published its "Maritime 2050" strategy, amplifying the power of UK maritime business clusters to foster a climate of innovation.

Last year's clean maritime demonstration competition underlined the sheer depth of the sector's potential, with 55 projects winning a share of £23 million to develop carbon-free solutions such as hydrogen-fuelled vessels and shipping charge points powered by offshore wind turbines. Building on that success, we will now make the competition a regular event, creating more opportunities for industry to bring cutting-edge technologies to market.

Alongside that news, I can announce today that the Department for Transport—I am delighted to be joined by the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson)—has committed £206 million to develop a UK shipping office for reducing emissions, or SHORE, which will fund research into and development of zero-emission vessels and help to roll out the infrastructure that enables the UK to achieve its goal of becoming a world leader in sustainable maritime technologies.

Fourthly, shipbuilding is a long-term investment, and the more we can do to shelter it from market storms the better, so the fourth aspect of our plan is about providing greater financial support for shipbuilders to win orders. Access to finance for underwriting contracts is an essential element of any shipbuilding enterprise. Alongside banks and working capital loans, the Government also have a role to play in helping to finance vessel contracts.

UK export finance already offers credit facilities to support British companies winning work overseas. To make UK shipbuilders more competitive, we are bidding for orders for new ships from domestic customers. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is now working up plans to underwrite contracts for

1.[Official Report, 15 March 2022, Vol. 710, c. 10MC.]

UK shipbuilders building ships for UK operation. BEIS aims to launch this new home shipbuilding credit guarantee scheme in May.

Switching to exports, opportunity is opening up for suppliers to increase their market share. In 2020, we exported £2.2 billion-worth of ships, boats and floating structures. We believe that we should be able to grow our exports by 45% by 2030. To make that happen, we are opening a new Maritime Capability Campaign Office. Covering all aspects of the shipbuilding enterprise, from platforms to sub-systems, to the supply chain, it will use robust industry analysis of global markets to help suppliers reach untapped markets. Our success in the long term will hinge on the strength of our skills base.

This brings me to the final aspect of our plan. We are determined to develop the next generation of shipbuilding talent, so today we are establishing a UK shipbuilding skills taskforce. Led by the Department for Education and working in tandem with the National Shipbuilding Office and devolved Administrations, it will bridge skills gaps and learn from best practice, particularly in relation to new and emerging technologies. Above all, it will act as a megaphone for the varied and exciting careers that shipbuilding can offer up and down the country, from designing cutting-edge environmentally friendly ferries to developing propulsion systems for complex warships.

The building blocks of our refreshed strategy are settling into place. Our NSO and Maritime Capability Campaign Office are up and running. Our UK shipbuilding skills taskforce is accepting applications from today, and, in the coming months, we will be establishing a new shipbuilding enterprise for growth. Co-chaired by the chief executive officer of the National Shipbuilding Office and a senior industry executive, it will unite the finest minds in shipping to overcome some of the sector's toughest challenges.

In other words, today, we offer a powerful vision of what shipbuilding will look like in 2030. It is a vision of a supercharged sector with thousands of highly skilled workers; a vision to make this the country of choice for specialist commercial and naval vessels and systems, components and technologies; a vision that generates the increased investment to level up our nation; and a vision that will spark a British shipbuilding renaissance and inspire even more countries to seek out that "made-in-Britain" stamp.

The framework is ready. Now we will be working with our superb shipbuilders, our supply chains and across Government to help transform this great ambition into a prosperous reality. I commend this refreshed strategy and this statement to the House.

12.42 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): After months of delay, I am pleased that the Minister has come before the House with a shipbuilding strategy.

Now, we all know that the Prime Minister loves a photo opportunity or two, so I am sure that he will enjoy his trip to Merseyside today when he can dress up in his favourite fluorescent jacket and his little hard hat and make his historical analogies to Britain's proud shipbuilding past. Perhaps while he is there, he would like to explain why the Ministry of Defence has given a £10 million contract this week to a Dutch yard for a vessel that could have been built right here in Britain.

Despite the Prime Minister's jingoism and nostalgia, the reality is this: the Royal Navy has only 13 frigates and six destroyers. Our Royal Navy is being asked to take on increasing responsibilities, but one in five ships has disappeared from our surface fleet since 2010. It is no surprise, therefore, that the Defence Committee has concluded that the Navy cannot fulfil the full ambition of the integrated review with its current fleet. Our Navy needs more ships, but it is also vital that we ensure that they are built right here in Britain. Our shipyards are crying out for an end to the feast-and-famine cycle of procurement, yet, despite the 30-year pipeline, there is no commitment to ensure that ships are built in UK yards.

Our steel industry and shipyards are national assets, which is why Labour has called for a "British built by default" approach to defence procurement. The GMB has said that Ministers are

"again sowing uncertainty with their disastrous policy refusing to guarantee work for UK yards...No other shipbuilding nation would dream of procuring its own vessels in this way."

I must ask the Minister this: why does the strategy not promise a "British built by default" approach to defence procurement? Why does the strategy not include targets for UK steel in UK ships? Without either, how can the Minister ensure investment in his stated ambition of local jobs invested in our communities?

The strategy also fails to tackle the deep-seated problems of MOD mismanagement and delivery. The National Audit Office currently rates no major shipbuilding programmes as being on time or on budget, and it is only getting worse. The number of MOD projects rated "amber/red" has doubled and fleet solid support ships have moved from amber to "amber/red" in the past year. Why has the strategy been published without a clear timeline for delivery? How will the £5 billion cover the cost of 150 ships, and is this even new money?

At a time of increasing threats, it is not the time for vanity projects, but the Government, and the Prime Minister in particular, continue to push ahead with a new royal yacht. The Defence Committee had stated that it has "received no evidence of the advantage to the Royal Navy"

in acquiring it. Does the Minister still think that this is the best way to spend MOD money?

Chasing headlines and photo opportunities on shipbuilding is one thing, delivery, value for money and investment in Britain are quite another. Unfortunately, this strategy fails on all those counts.

Jeremy Quin: I make no apologies for taking time to come to the House with this strategy, because we want to make certain that it is a strategy that works, and that is exactly what we are delivering. There is no jingoism or nostalgia about this strategy; it is hard facts that will deliver for our shipbuilding industry. It is a shipbuilding industry that needs to embrace the modern technology of artificial intelligence and environmental sustainability. That is why we are establishing the UK Shipping Office for Reducing Emissions, with £206 million behind it. It is a strategy that will support our ship buyers with a home shipping guarantee system, in the same way that we support our exports with export guarantees. We have a National Shipbuilding Office that is doing great work and is cohering across Government and delivering for the entire industry.

[Jeremy Quin]

The hon. Gentleman spoke of warships. We can be very proud that we are putting more money into warships—£1.7 billion will be the spend by the end of this Parliament, doubling our current commitment. The Type 31 frigate HMS *Venturer* had her steel cut in Rosyth, with HMS *Glasgow* now well under way on the Clyde. Opportunity exists for Type 32, with up to five entering service with the Royal Navy, and a certainty that we will be going beyond our current level of 19 frigates and destroyers by the end of this decade.

The hon. Gentleman referred to FSS ships, which he knows will have a very substantial element of UK build. They are on time to be delivered within a couple of years of the procurement. We are doing our utmost to ensure that we derive value from this strategy and that it will deliver for Britain.

The hon. Gentleman asks why we cannot have a “build in Britain” strategy. As he knows, that is exactly what we do for warships, and it is this Government who have extended that to say that, for every ship being acquired by the MOD, we will make a case-by-case examination to see whether that needs to be a build in Britain. We have broadened that scope.

When we go beyond defence and warships, we cannot, on the one hand, say that we will support the international rules-based order, yet, on the other, ignore rules organisations such as the World Trade Organisation. We need to work within those rules to get the maximum value for our country, which is exactly what the NSO will do. We have a programme of 150 vessels, £4 billion of support going into British shipbuilding over the next three years, and exciting opportunities that our industry can follow.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The British-built Type 45 destroyer is arguably the best of its class in the world, but it has been plagued by persistent problems with its propulsion system. The Ministry has a “put right” programme, but it will not be completed until 2028. Given that we now have to deter a Russia that is prepared to bomb maternity hospitals, we need those ships fully capable and fit to fight now, not in six years’ time. Will the Minister go from this place back to his Department, review the entire programme and issue an urgent operational requirement, so that if they were required, those wonderfully capable ships can fight to keep our country and NATO free?

Jeremy Quin: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that the Type 45s are excellent bits of kit. They are one of our bits of equipment that I know our adversaries fear, and rightly so. The concern we always have is balancing operational requirements; as he knows, we have two Type 45s out on station at the moment, so we must make certain that we can bring those ships back in for their power improvement project upgrades. I can confirm that we are looking at ways to accelerate the PIP programme, and I recognise that it is important that we do so.

I also apologise to my right hon. Friend, and I dropped him a note this morning. In response to an intervention yesterday, I said that *Dauntless* was undergoing sea trials, but I had conflated sea trials with the test and commissioning phase. That is where she is now, but the three new diesel engines are working successfully and she will be embarking on sea trials in a few weeks’ time.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement and commend his fleet-of-foot actions in changing the range from Appledore to Glasgow to Appledore to Rosyth. That is an important correction to make.

The fourth from final paragraph in the Minister’s statement cuts to the chase on this issue in the way that the strategy does not when he states that it is a vision to make the UK,

“the country of choice for specialist commercial and naval vessels and systems, components and technologies”.

Among the 80 pages of waffle and padding, the strategy alights briefly on that point, but not in the way it really should. The strategy also highlights the word “international” 31 times. I welcome the realisation that in a global economy with global supply chains the notion that we can procure every single element in the United Kingdom, while a noble ambition that we should sweat as much as we can, is naive.

I welcome the fact that the national strategy sets out a range of opportunities, which excellent yards all around Scotland are ready to lean into and capitalise on. I am a little sceptical about whether the funding announced in the strategy will have a massive impact across all the yards in the United Kingdom, but I hope it will.

Scotland’s skills, as I am sure the Minister will agree, have been highlighted many times in the past decade, not least on the QE2-class ships, which are outstanding in their quality and performance, the Type 26 under construction in Glasgow and the Type 31 under build in Rosyth. He will welcome, as I do, the export success that has been achieved, with 26 going to Canada and Australia, but he will know that those are in-country builds. That is not to downplay the opportunities of intellectual property and engineering that Glasgow will enjoy from them, but does he agree that really what we need is Type 31s sold to countries that will require them to be built in Rosyth?

Jeremy Quin: First, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge, this is a UK-wide endeavour. There are great assets and skills in Scotland, and I am delighted that this week, I think, we have signed a lease to ensure that there is space in Edinburgh for part of the National Shipbuilding Office to be based there. This is a national endeavour, delivering for the whole of the UK. He is right that £4 billion is a lot of money and we want it to go further by winning export orders.

The hon. Gentleman is right that the Type 26 exports to Canada and Australia are a solid bit of progress. It is right to say that they will support thousands of jobs and design is incredibly important, as are many of the subsystems often used by overseas purchasers, even as they do a lot of work on the frigates themselves. We will learn from them as well as their learning from us.

On Type 31 and export, there has been great news: first the work with Indonesia and secondly the down selection last Friday by the Polish navy of Type 31 or Arrowhead. That is an extremely important step forward and I am very proud to have been part of it. I spoke to my Polish opposite number on that and other topics this morning. It would be great if we could also sell Type 31 to countries that do not have the capacity to build themselves, and do that work in Rosyth or elsewhere. That is a grand ambition. However, I am delighted that our design, our subsystems and our skills are being recognised in the export orders we are already winning.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I warmly welcome my hon. Friend's statement. I am sure he has been glued to the Transport Committee's current inquiry into fuelling the future, where we have heard evidence about a plethora of new, cleaner fuels being developed for use across the transport sector. With the £206 million he has announced for the UK Shipping Office for Reducing Emissions, may I urge him to give as much regard to the cleaner fuels of the future as to the tech being developed on vessel?

Jeremy Quin: Absolutely; I thank my hon. Friend and look forward to the conclusion of the Select Committee's work. He is right about fuelling for the future, and I have no doubt that my colleagues in the Department for Transport will place a significant emphasis on exactly those issues. They certainly did in the first round, with the £23 million of the clean maritime demonstration competition, which had 55 awards and was oversubscribed. I know many of the R&D suggestions coming forward were in exactly that space, which offers a great opportunity for the future.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my non-pecuniary interests entry in the Register. I welcome the Minister's statement. In his original report, Sir John Parker emphasised the drumbeat of work and regular orders that is important for yards—but that means orders. The Minister's own Department, in the past few weeks, has awarded a £10 million contract to a Dutch yard, even though I warned him about that several months ago. He has given no commitments on the FSS, and the Border Force and the Home Office are looking at procuring boats from the Dutch, too. No other country does that. We need a full commitment from Government to ensuring that when those orders are procured, they are procured in UK yards. They used to hide behind the European Union, but they can no longer do that. I understand that Ministers are now hiding behind some international trade issues, but no other country has this problem.

Jeremy Quin: The right hon. Gentleman and I did have a discussion across this Dispatch Box regarding the order, and his intuition proved correct. There was a competition process, and he proved to be correct in his assumption, although I emphasise that that was not a new build of a new vessel, but a requirement for the Royal Navy to have an existing vessel that it could practise some new developments on. It went into the market as a competition and that is how it ended. They fine-tuned the competition to ensure that it was fully fair, and we got that result.

I know the right hon. Gentleman has been a regular advocate of an FSS build in this country. FSS is proceeding and it will be substantially built. I am trying to remember exactly when the two years starts—I believe it is two years from the start of the manufacturing phase but, if it is not, I will write to him and leave a note in the Library.

On the point about the WTO rules, we do not take them lightly and it is right that we work within them, but that does not mean that we do not do everything in our power to maximise the benefits to British shipbuilding. That is what the National Shipbuilding Office has been set up to do, and that is what this refresh is about: whether on shore, on the home shipbuilding guarantee

or on skills, we must ensure that we win, that we succeed and that we can compete with and be just as productive as other northern European yards.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I, too, welcome the statement from the Minister, which is excellent—what is not to like? This is about jobs, livelihoods, R&D, technology, self-sufficiency, investment and exports. I welcome the growing imperative towards a “build it in Britain” strategy. That is very important. Given our proud shipbuilding pedigree in Wales, England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, does he agree that this is great for the Union? Moreover, noting that we are a proud seafaring member of the United Nations P5 and of NATO, does he agree that we are better off together?

Jeremy Quin: I absolutely agree that we are better off together. I agree with my hon. Friend that we should build in Britain; that should be the result of this refresh. We should be not only winning in Britain, but winning export orders overseas, due to the quality of our products and ideas and the productivity of our manufacturers. I agree with all that in the context of the United Kingdom build. That is a huge emphasis and, as Scottish yards have found, whether with the British Antarctic Survey or Babcock, having the weight of the Royal Navy—a benchmark Navy—behind them and the UK Government in full support really does help to bring in those export orders. We are committed to jobs, skills and infrastructure the length and breadth of the UK.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement about the commitment to shipbuilding. May I urge him to do all he can to make sure that the ships are built in Britain, using British steel? In Rotherham, we make world-leading steel and we are the only place making speciality steel. If he could make that commitment, it would give real security to the industry.

Jeremy Quin: In the same way that we have that pipeline of 150 vessels, as the hon. Lady knows, we always set out the pipeline of what is coming up imminently to help steel manufacturers in the UK to know where the opportunities are. With some ships—for example, the carriers—a huge proportion of the steel was from UK sources. It does vary according to the technical specification. However, I am absolutely convinced of one thing: if we can increase the amount of shipbuilding in Britain, the amount of UK steel being used will increase proportionately as well.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): This is welcome news and I thank the Minister for his statement, but does he agree that these warships should be built in Great Britain by great British workers, using great British steel, and—the bit that will upset the Opposition—using great British coal to make that steel?

Jeremy Quin: I feel that today I have trod on the toes of many Departments in bringing forward many policies from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for Transport and the Department for Education, which are going to do a great job for British shipbuilding. I am not going to plunge into coal—I will leave that to my colleagues—but I agree 100% that warships will be made in this country by British shipyards doing a great job, as they always have

[Jeremy Quin]

done, in supporting the Royal Navy. The more UK content we can have in those ships, of all forms, the more I welcome that.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): In 1941, Winston Churchill embarked on HMS Prince of Wales to meet President Roosevelt and sign the Atlantic charter. That was a battleship—a warship. In 1947, the royal family embarked on HMS Vanguard to start their South African tour. HMS Vanguard was a battleship—a warship. May I suggest to the Minister that it would be better to spend the cost of a Type 31 frigate on another Type 31 frigate than on a national flagship?

Jeremy Quin: I respect the hon. Gentleman's views. I remind him that the cost of the national flagship, spread over four years, is about 0.1% of the MOD's overall budget, so this does not break the bank; it is a relatively small proportion of the overall budget. The ship has a job to do. It is not a matter of being a royal yacht, as the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) suggested earlier—it is a national flagship with a job to do. A huge proportion of the most successful cities on earth are on the coastline. It has a job in marketing and spreading the word for global Britain. I think it will be a great success. People decry it now, but I have no doubt that in five years' time they will be saying it is great and in 30 years' time they will not be able to imagine us not having one.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): I thank the Minister for his excellent statement. Does he agree, though, that we should not just rely on domestic demand to drive investment in British shipbuilding but look to sell more abroad, as with, for example, the contract Babcock secured with Poland last week?

Jeremy Quin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. A lot of work went into that. I spoke to my Polish opposite number only this morning. The Poles are delighted by what they are getting. The Arrowhead Type 31 is a fantastic frigate that will do brilliantly for the Polish navy, which works very closely with the Royal Navy in developing these ideas. We have plans around the rest of the world with our allies and our friends to support their capabilities and at the same time to support design and build here in the UK.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The Minister prays in aid of his case international rules, but surely that requires international agreement, conformity and consensus. The Government used to claim that the issue was EU rules which no other EU country followed. Then they claimed it was WTO rules. Now it is the international order. Now in the statement they have declared the fleet solid support ships to be warships. Frankly, the last veil has been ripped away and his policy is naked to the world. Why will he not declare that they will now buy British first?

Jeremy Quin: We will be buying British in so many ways among those 150 vessels, but we will be doing that not because we have retreated into a narrow protectionist hole but because the design, innovation and skills in this country will be second to none as we work through the benefits of this refresh. The right hon. Gentleman is

trying to hide behind the rules. I am trying to say: let us look at the rules to make certain they work and work in the interests of this country. That is why we have the NSO and SHORE. It is why we will have the home shipbuilding credit guarantee. We are finding ways to assist and to ensure—this is the most fundamental point; I know he wants this as much as I do—that our shipyards are as productive as every other shipyard in northern Europe. We are not there yet, we need to get there and we are determined to make that happen.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): My constituency has 23 inhabited islands and therefore ferries are never far from my mind. Babcock is the site of a state-of-the-art advanced manufacturing facility currently manufacturing Type 31 frigates. Does the Minister agree that this expert workforce are ideally placed to design and to manufacture specialist vessels that could serve Scotland's island communities, and indeed those across the UK, for many years to come?

Jeremy Quin: I certainly agree that there are great skills and great design capacity in Rosyth. I have seen that for myself. I went there to see the new shipbuilding shed, which is a fantastic bit of work. There is a great workforce and a great sense of optimism, quite rightly, in the yard. From memory, the ferries contract has been awarded elsewhere by the Scottish Government, and it has not been a happy situation, so I would not wish to impinge on their personal grief. But are there good skills in Scotland that could be used, and is Babcock a good option? I would say so, but it is not for me to award these contracts.

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): While communities across the north such as those in my own constituency recognise and appreciate industrial investment in places that share a proud industrial heritage built by generations of craft, skill and dedication, does the Minister recognise that his party was responsible for the decimation of our shipbuilding industry over many years? I join hon. Members across the House in asking him to commit to UK shipyards such as A&P Tyne in my constituency to secure these jobs. I also ask him to commit to involving and consulting the trade unions in the new national shipbuilding strategy.

Jeremy Quin: I and the trade unions I have met, particularly on the Clyde, have the same sort of vision for the future of our national shipbuilding endeavour. That is to have those high skills and to have a workforce who are trained, effective and incredibly proud of what they do, which I know is the case today. A huge number of manufacturing jobs were lost under the last Labour Government; I am afraid that the decline of national shipbuilding has not been under the purview of one party or another. But this party and this Government are determined to reverse that, and we do so by ensuring that we can compete effectively on the world stage and that we have the skills, the innovation, the R&D and the productivity. That is what this refresh is about. We will be winning, and winning well, on the international stage. I know the hon. Lady is as keen on that as I am.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement and very much welcome it. There is, as he knows, a great tradition and history of shipbuilding

at Harland and Wolff in Belfast in Northern Ireland. It is critical that we in Northern Ireland play a central role in the national shipbuilding strategy. Can he confirm that Harland and Wolff in Belfast will have an important, practical, physical role in that strategy, and that financial benefits related to wage packets and so on will come as a boost for the Northern Ireland economy, which will be a central objective for us in getting the benefit of this strategy as well?

Jeremy Quin: It is fair to say that I am very excited by the prospects of Harland and Wolff. It is great to see a great shipyard with a terrific history hopefully sparking back into life as part of our renaissance across the UK. I am not going to be prescriptive about what yards and what procurements will be involved, as that would be wrong on all kinds of levels, but we have 150 vessels coming through over the next 30 years and £1.7 billion of procurement for MOD vessels by the end of this Parliament. There is lots of opportunity, and I wish everyone well in going for it.

UK Support for Aid Workers and the Afghan People

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

1.9 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now come to the Select Committee statement. Sarah Champion will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement, and will call Sarah Champion to respond to those questions in turn. Members can expect to be called only once, and I stress that interventions should be questions, not mini-statements, and should be brief. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): The Select Committee on International Development published its report, “Afghanistan: UK support for aid workers and the Afghan people” last Friday, one week after Russia invaded Ukraine. I thank all the witnesses we had; I thank the members of the Committee; and I thank our excellent Committee team for all their work, both on the inquiry and on putting the report together. Our focus was on the impact of the Afghanistan withdrawal on the humanitarian situation in that country, its impact on the operation of aid organisations and the people working for them, and how to help prevent similar impacts from playing out in the UK’s response to other humanitarian crises in future. We brought forward publication of our report by a week, as we noted with grave concern parallels emerging in the UK’s response to the rapidly deteriorating situation in Ukraine.

UK and allied forces left Afghanistan in August 2021. The Taliban takeover was rapid. The humanitarian jeopardy is extreme, and the scale of the humanitarian response required is unprecedented. At the same time, the safety of aid workers has been compromised. Any contingency plans that the Government had for evacuating aid workers were neither apparent to the sector nor scaled adequately. Some Afghans who worked on projects funded by the UK Government are now reporting that their lives are at risk of reprisals from the Taliban authorities. Aid workers are at the forefront of responding to people in humanitarian jeopardy. Our report concludes that the Government have a moral duty towards those workers who have helped deliver UK aid projects in Afghanistan and, by extension, aid workers helping to deliver UK aid elsewhere.

The Government’s immigration schemes do not adequately support aid workers seeking safe passage to the UK. Many Afghan aid workers feel abandoned by our Government. The Committee’s concern about immigration routes was narrow: the Government’s treatment of Afghan aid workers seeking safe passage to the UK. In our December oral evidence session, witnesses told us that the Government’s contingency plans for the evacuation of aid workers were neither apparent to the sector nor scaled adequately. Our report calls on the Government to accelerate without further delay all pathways of the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, and ensure that aid sector staff are explicitly recognised and prioritised for protection under that scheme.

[Sarah Champion]

We fear that the same approach to people fleeing a humanitarian crisis is being adopted by the UK Government in their response to Ukraine. Yesterday, we heard worrying reports that Ukrainian staff in the British embassy in Kyiv are being denied entry to the UK. Some British staff have described what is happening as “Afghanistan part 2”. Once again, we see the Government showing the same inflexibilities by only making limited, begrudging concessions to pre-existing UK immigration routes; failing to provide sufficient clarity on what routes are available; and dragging their feet in setting up new routes, or variations to existing ones. That response must change.

Following 40 years of war, the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is devastating and worsening. The withdrawal of UK and allied forces precipitated the rapid collapse of the previous Afghan Government and takeover by Taliban militants. Since then, the number of people needing humanitarian assistance has grown to 24.4 million, more than half the population. Some 23 million people are facing acute hunger. It has been a harsh winter, following hard on the heels of Afghanistan’s worst drought in 27 years, and its people continue to suffer as the country emerges into spring. We are deeply grateful to aid workers, be they British, Afghan or any other nationality, for all they have done and continue to do for the people of Afghanistan. The work they do is phenomenal, but my Committee is ashamed that our Government have not given them the support and clarity they need. In our report, we urge the Government to take a broader, more holistic view of their duty of care towards people working in the aid sector. They simply do not accord those people the respect and support they deserve.

In terms of humanitarian need, witnesses told us how overlapping factors are affecting the situation in Afghanistan and the disbursal of aid to the Afghan people. There has been a complex interplay between the banking liquidity crisis and the deepening humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Women, children and minority groups are suffering disproportionately. Our Committee heard how international sanctions designed to punish the Taliban were instead cruelly punishing the people of Afghanistan. We heard how the UK Government have been too slow to act on mitigating the impact of those sanctions. In our report, we conclude that the Government should have liaised more effectively and swiftly with the aid sector, international allies and financial institutions to help to resolve the challenges that sanctions pose to the aid sector, address the collapse of the banking system in Afghanistan and free up the nominated funds frozen by the World Bank.

We welcome the UN Security Council’s December 2021 adoption of a resolution to provide exemptions from sanctions for humanitarian assistance. It also provides exemptions for other activities designed to support basic needs, such as the provision of shelter, food and water, education, health, nutrition and hygiene. We also welcome the UK Government’s adoption of that resolution into UK law at the end of January this year. We urge our Government to further step up their efforts to work with the UN and aid organisations to ensure they can effectively operate under those exemptions. Furthermore, we call on the UK Government to press for the UN Security Council to extend that resolution or bring forward

further resolutions to provide additional exemptions for development assistance, closely linked to the performance of the Taliban on upholding human rights and international law.

The World Bank released a statement on 1 March, after the Committee’s report had gone to print, noting further progress on agreeing a plan for the release of further funds from the Afghanistan reconstruction trust fund. We urge the Government to do more to encourage the World Bank to swiftly release the remaining funds, so that aid organisations can use that money to provide humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan. The Government have pledged significant sums of aid since their withdrawal from Afghanistan, but the release of that aid to people who so desperately need it has been excruciatingly slow. The Committee’s report concludes that the Government should have worked faster to disburse the aid they pledged to Afghanistan in 2021.

We urge the Government to continue to support the Afghan people, to whom they have a moral responsibility given the decades of UK military and political interventions there. At the same time, we fear that the narrative of the UK not acting swiftly enough to disburse pledged UK aid will play out in their response to Ukraine. Again the Government have pledged significant sums of aid, but how quick will they be to disburse that aid to the Ukrainian people? Speed is of the absolute essence when people’s very lives hang in the balance. I commend the report, and this statement, to the House.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for her excellent statement. I do not want to put her on the spot, but can I ask her what duty of care she thinks the Government have towards aid workers?

Sarah Champion: The Government’s contracts with non-governmental organisations are very clear that they do not have a direct duty of care. However, my Committee felt that they do have a moral duty of care, because in the country in which they operate, they are operating as the face of the UK Government—they are going to stations with the UK flag on them, with “UK Aid” written on them, particularly when they are working directly with the UK embassy. We felt that the Government very much have a moral duty towards aid workers, even if there is not a personnel-type duty towards them.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I thank the Clerks and the Chair of the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), for this excellent and detailed report, and I pay tribute to the NGO workers on the ground. They are working in extraordinarily difficult circumstances, and I so admire their courage. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we are seeing the same problems in Ukraine as in Afghanistan, so does she agree that the Government must learn from previous mistakes and have full contingency plans in place to get humanitarian workers out of the country as and if necessary, no matter whether they are employees of a directly funded organisation or subcontractors?

The disbursal of aid to Afghanistan has been woefully slow, and we still do not know how much of the aid allocated by the Government has been disbursed. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office must publish monthly updates on the allocation and disbursal of aid to Afghanistan

and countries in the region? Bureaucratic hurdles continue to hold up the \$1 billion that has already been committed to the Afghanistan people through the Afghanistan reconstruction trust fund. Development in Afghanistan will continue to go backward if we are not funding healthcare workers and teachers. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to provide an urgent update and appoint a dedicated Minister for aid, so that we can unlock this problem?

Sarah Champion: My hon. Friend makes the most pertinent points, and I completely agree with all the issues that she raises. From our analysis, it looks like two thirds of the fund pledged in emergency money to Afghanistan has been disbursed, but we are finding it incredibly difficult to get that information, and I hope the Government are able to address that.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): As a fellow member of the Committee, I hope it has been made crystal clear to the Government what needs to be done. The report not least gives further credence to what we already know, which is that this Government have seriously and regrettably let down the people of Afghanistan. During oral evidence, the Committee heard that Afghan women were suffering disproportionately throughout the crisis, and the report recommends that the UK Government seek

“to ensure that the rights of women and girls are respected by the Taliban”,

yet this week we learned from the FCDO’s own equalities impact assessment that the scale of reductions to specific gender interventions will impact efforts to advance gender equality, with a reduction of 75% for violence against women and girls bilateral programming being just one example. Is that not a stark illustration that these cuts need to be reversed immediately and that there needs to be a Secretary of State for international development, or at the very least a Minister dedicated to the role, to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable in our societies are properly represented and advocated for by this Government?

Sarah Champion: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman, my fellow Committee member, and I fully agree with all his points. I think he would share how painful it was to hear from those women and girls during our evidence gathering, and in particular the pleas from the Afghan judges—they put their faith in us, and we let them down.

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (ANTICIPATION AND ADJUSTMENTS) BILL

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 56), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Question put forthwith, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Backbench Business

International Women’s Day

1.23 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered International Women’s Day.

There is a dreadful poignancy in opening this debate today. The bombing of a Ukrainian women and children’s hospital yesterday has left pregnant women on stretchers, covered in blood from shrapnel wounds, and I would hope that the message that we send from this place to every woman in Ukraine during this week of events to mark International Women’s Day is that we stand with those women against those who wage war on their country. We stand alongside those women in their battle for a free and independent Ukraine. We stand with the people of Belarus and Russia who do not want war. I was delighted to meet the Belarusian opposition leader, Svetlana Tikhonovskaya, in Parliament today to reinforce that message.

In Ukraine, International Women’s Day is usually a public holiday—an opportunity to mark the unique role that women play in the culture of their nation—but this year has been very different indeed, because it is the women of Ukraine who make up the vast majority of refugees. The Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), will share my horror at seeing those women fleeing their homeland. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is right to be redoubling the Government’s efforts to cut unnecessary bureaucracy, so that we can offer women who seek sanctuary in our country swift passage.

Acts of war and aggression disproportionately affect women. In Afghanistan, just 12 months ago on International Women’s Day, that nation celebrated the remarkable contribution made by Afghan women against the challenges of the covid pandemic. Now, the hard-won progress made on women’s rights over the past two decades has been all but reversed, with a new Taliban Government having no place for the 67 women elected to the Afghan Parliament. We know that the best way we can fight dictatorships and autocracies around the world is through support for democratic capacity for effective democratic institutions.

The truth is that every democracy is fragile; it has to be nurtured. As we mark International Women’s Day as parliamentarians, we should focus every fibre of our body on how we can strengthen democracies around the world, because democracy is under threat like never before. Strong parliamentarians are representative of their people. Women playing their proper role in Parliament is not an optional extra; it is essential for our legitimacy. This year’s theme of “Break the Bias” could not be more appropriate, because there are few democracies around the world where women have an equal role in policy making and policy scrutiny—not even our own. Some 27 years on from the 1995 UN Beijing platform for action, which demanded worldwide equal participation for women in political decision making, we have seen slow progress, with just one in four elected representatives around the world being a woman.

For International Women’s Day 2022, let us call for a renewed commitment to women’s equal role in policy making and policy scrutiny to ensure progress on securing

[Mrs Maria Miller]

women's roles in democratic institutions. Internationally, both our Parliament and our Government actively support the rights of women and girls. The Government, through their work on education for girls and their support for organisations such as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, work hard to help build women's political participation. Here in Parliament, many of us are members of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians, and we work with legislative bodies around the world to share our expertise and knowledge. Gender-sensitive Parliament audits are a practical support that the CPA has put in place for jurisdictions to address their institutionalised gender inequality. Over the past year, the CPA has trained women parliamentarians around the world to deal with online abuse, helping to find a way forward on one of the issues that holds so many women back from wanting to seek election in the first place.

We want strong democracies around the world, but it has never been more important for our own Parliament to be an exemplar. In Westminster, there are still twice as many men as women elected to this place, demonstrating the challenges even embedded democracies have. I stand here as a Conservative Member of Parliament to say that there are three men for every one woman in my party, which is the Government party. That has to change.

Each party takes this problem extremely seriously. I know that the Conservative party does, and we are acting. It is right that we press Government and political parties to do more, but Parliament itself has to act, too, as the custodian of one of the most important parts of our democracy is our legislature. As Sue Maguire highlighted in her report to Government in 2018, while quotas for women to come into Parliament have a place—the Labour party has made good use of them—they do not “address the cultural and working practices in Parliament and local Government that remain significant barriers”.

We can and must challenge the Government to do more, and parties to act, but if we simply say it is the fault of political parties, we are not listening to the mountain of evidence to the contrary.

I applaud Mr Speaker for creating real momentum for change here, even before he became Speaker, by addressing for the first time issues such as the personal security of Members. We also now have a behaviour code and grievance procedures, thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom). We have proxy voting for new parents and effective procedures to deal with bullying, as we saw earlier this week, but where is the progress on the other measures that have been put forward?

Effecting change in this place can feel almost impossible. Although we have Select Committees to hold the Government to account, where is the mechanism to hold ourselves to account? There is no structure in Parliament for Members to identify a programme of co-ordinated change—coherent, transparent and accountable change—that would make this place somewhere that more women want to come to and stay in.

As the Women and Equalities Committee's report that was published last week by my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) said, five years on from the Childs “The Good

Parliament” report and 10 more reports like it, many of the recommendations that have been put forward remain unanswered. Some of the actions can be delivered by Parliament and some need Parliament to work with the Government, but above all we need a co-ordinated plan of action for the House of Commons to get our House in order and to get equal representation of women as a top priority.

I will give a couple of examples. We need to ensure that the Government implement section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, which is already in place, to require parties to publish data on the diversity of their candidates and appointments to the House of Lords, a recommendation made more than five years ago. We need to focus our House service public engagement on women's participation in democracy and reach out to women across the United Kingdom to encourage them to consider standing for election, as we did at the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament's event on Tuesday evening, which was attended by more than 100 women. Those events should not be held by Members; they should be held by the House of Commons to encourage more women to stand for election.

We need to focus the House communications team on talking about the positive changes that we have already made to our culture here as a result of the new behaviour code and the grievance process. We need to work with the Government to ensure that there is legislation and enforcement against online threats, which disproportionately affect women Members. We need to embed a programme of training for Members who are using social media. We know that those actions need to happen, but we need to have a plan and there needs to be accountability for swift progress.

We are the custodians of our legislative body. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for securing the time for this debate and the APPG officers and members for their support in it. A representative and inclusive House of Commons is essential for the fully effective functioning of a parliamentary democracy. The House itself has a unique responsibility to take steps to ensure that we are representative of the population. Recruiting good people is a matter for political parties, but parties cannot change what people think of Parliament or how they feel about working in the House of Commons. I want today's debate marking International Women's Day to be a call to action for our own Parliament. As Members, we need to ensure that the House of Commons is a place that everyone aspires to be part of, including women.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Hon. Members will see that there are a good number of people wishing to speak in today's debate. I do not want to impose a time limit, so my advice would be to speak for within six to seven minutes. That way, we will get everybody in.

1.33 pm

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and I associate myself with her comments, especially those regarding the women and children of Ukraine.

Disagreements are par for the course in this place. We are often divided, yet occasionally there are issues that bring us together, unify our sense of purpose and drive us towards collective goals that can deliver a brighter, fairer and more equal future. This is one such issue and the tenor and tone of today's debate is testament to that unanimity.

Ensuring that we can debate International Women's Day is so important. It gives us a chance to reflect on where we are as a society and on the progress we have made to date on gender equality. Equally, however, it helps to highlight how much further we still must go to achieve true equality and it marks a call to collective action and shared responsibility for delivering and accelerating gender balance.

Although it is clear that we have come a long way and made significant progress in recent decades, we still have a mammoth task ahead of us to achieve full gender equality. The gender pay gap still exists, women continue to face workplace discrimination, misogynistic abuse is rife, violence against women and girls persists, and women still fall behind men in healthcare and education. While those inequalities remain, the need to mark International Women's Day is stronger than ever.

Of course, that is particularly true given the impact of covid-19, which hit women disproportionately hard and which analysis suggests could have put gender equality back decades. At the height of the pandemic, a report looked at the impact of covid-19 on women in my city of Coventry. It found that pre-existing inequalities in debt, violence, healthcare, employment and childcare had been exacerbated. It warned that unless a gender-sensitive approach was taken to rebuilding the country and economy, decades of progress towards achieving gender equality could be reversed, so I call on the Government to review the impact of their policies on women and to ensure that the recovery from the pandemic is an equal recovery with women at its heart.

Although International Women's Day provides an opportunity to shine a light on such inequalities, it is also a time to celebrate the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. In Coventry, one initiative from the Godiva Trust will see residents pay tribute to women who are special to them by helping to decorate some trees placed around the city. People are being invited to attach messages to the trees' branches to celebrate the lives of inspiring women. That made me think about the inspirational women who have touched my life and who my message would be about. I am privileged to say that there have been many influential women in my life but I pay special tribute to my mum and my two sisters.

My mum was my single biggest inspiration. Without her influence, without her leading the way and showing me that the only thing that limits people in this world is their imagination, and most of all, without her love and support, I would not be where I am today. When she entered politics some 50 years ago—I think that is actually when I entered it too—little did I know that it would become such a large part of my life and would lead me to be right here, the 414th woman ever elected to this place.

While my two sisters did not follow the same path, politics none the less plays a part in their lives. They support me, share my concerns and experience my highs and lows. They give me my sense of resilience and we

share a mutual trust and an unconditional love. They are my biggest critics and my staunchest defenders. I know that they are proud of me, as I am of them.

As we mark International Women's Day, let us pay tribute to those closest to us: our carers, mothers, grandmothers, sisters and aunts. They are the often-unsung heroes who nurture and guide us, who shape our futures through their sacrifices and selfless actions, and whose very presence contributes to who and what we are today, even if we do not always recognise it. Let us pay tribute to the women whose achievements are so great, yet so often and so easily overlooked—the women whose achievements epitomise the spirit of International Women's Day.

1.38 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. International Women's Day is a day to celebrate and, this year, I have doggedly looked for things to celebrate, perhaps with a grim sense of determination. I will start by focusing on a few positive things, such as a young boy who, in his school assembly on Monday, said to me, "Tomorrow's International Women's Day. What are you doing to celebrate?". That is how far we have come—even 12-year-old boys wish to celebrate alongside us. I thank Hugo for asking me what I was going to do. I told him that I would speak in today's debate and celebrate international women.

I want to celebrate female entrepreneurship in this country. This morning I have been at No. 11 Downing Street to hear the brilliant women of the British Beauty Council talking about their new project to launch jobs in STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—and beauty, focusing on the fact that science and beauty go hand in hand. We have to make sure that brilliant women in this country study science subjects and go on to fabulous careers in scientific areas. We heard from an amazing woman, Tumi Siwoku, who spoke about her journey into the beauty industry via science-based A-levels. She was meant to study medicine and become a doctor, but her act of rebellion was to make sure that she went into beauty—and, my goodness, I love rebellious women. They are the ones who push boundaries, break down barriers and do the unexpected.

I also want to talk about the female entrepreneurs I met this week at somewhere far more traditional—Goldman Sachs. They are absolute leaders in their fields, and I want to talk specifically about a very young woman, Thuria Wenbar. She is the chief executive officer of e-Pharmacy, and she talked about her excitement at launching menopause products over the counter. She is still in her 20s, but she was talking about the menopause, and that shows how far we have come. It also pays tribute to the work of my hon. Friend—and she is my hon. Friend—the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who has done so much to break down the taboo and stigma around the menopause. Thuria spoke absolutely unashamedly of her determination to create prosperity and jobs for other women. She spoke about bias—her personal bias—in employing more women in her organisation, and that is one bias we do not wish to break.

I would like to pay tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who has done so

[Caroline Nokes]

much work on the menopause and women's health. We can look forward in a few short weeks to the female health strategy coming forward, and I would like to say that, in her role as the Minister for patient safety and primary care, she has been a breath of fresh air. Staying on that theme, I also look forward to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport making a real difference with her forthcoming online safety legislation. That could be a real game changer for young women, and indeed men, for whom the online harms they currently face every single day can spill over into real life. I have no doubt about her mission and determination to bring forward a fiercely effective piece of law.

There are other colleagues I want to celebrate. My hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), who is here, has done so much brilliant work on botox. It seemed really trivial this morning to be talking about the beauty industry, lipstick and botox, but her private Member's legislation—the Botulinum Toxin and Cosmetic Fillers (Children) Act 2021—makes it illegal to give botox to under-18s. We need to be protecting young women from the dangers of injectables and cosmetic procedures that can go horribly wrong and alter their looks forever, and we need to be protecting young women from that “Love Island” identical face, which actually looks pretty awful. I would also like to celebrate the brilliant female scientists who made vaccines for covid possible.

But, actually, today I do not want to celebrate at all; I want to talk about International Women's Day and the women we have seen in war who have been impacted by the Putin invasion of Ukraine. There are those killed by the war, those reporting on the war whether as a journalist or a citizen journalist via social media, and the doctors in the hospitals tending to the sick and the wounded, including the maternity hospitals that we have seen bombed.

I want to talk about one specific woman, Yaroslava Antipina. I do not know her—I had never heard of her before the war started—but she is keeping a daily diary of her life in war, and I know from what she has written that she wants to have her life back. She wants to be able to drink coffee in peace with the people she has met on Twitter. She has fled her home, and I wonder what it would feel like for all of us if we had been forced out of our homes and made to live again with our mothers in a different part of the country. She has taught me that, in Ukraine, International Women's Day is a holiday—there is a great idea, and perhaps we could introduce that here—but it is not a holiday from war. She wears a sweatshirt that says “Superwoman”, and she genuinely is one.

Yaroslava wants to be able to buy jeans, but she does not know whether the shops will be open, or whether the small shop she has gone to today will be open between 12 noon and 3 pm, so she has launched “operation jeans”, because she just wants to have a spare pair of trousers to wear. She has established her regular no make-up war look, and she posts photographs of it. I want to imagine what that would be like for each and every one of us coming into this Chamber with no make-up. That is why I referenced cosmetic procedures and the British Beauty Council, because we take all that for granted, and if we were her, we might have to accept that, for the conceivable future, everything will look different and our faces will look different.

Yaroslava talks of “this” life and “that” life. This life is the present, her reality; and that life was what she had before—freedom, and her coffee with friends, her jeans, her lipstick and her life in Kyiv. While we celebrate International Women's Day here, we have to recognise that, just as Yaroslava has a “this” and a “that” life, there is a life here and a life there: here there are no bombs, there are jeans in the shops and we can drink coffee whenever we want; and there they have none of those things. There are little girls in bomb shelters singing the song from “Frozen”, female doctors dodging bombs to treat the sick, female MPs staying defiantly in Kyiv—their capital—and a former Miss Ukraine brandishing her assault weapon in army uniform. There are women on the borders of Ukraine with their children, having left their husbands, their fathers and their son behind to fight. So on International Women's Day this year, I cannot celebrate, but I have to have hope that, as the women of influence in this country, we can make sure that we do better.

1.46 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is now two years since I delivered my maiden speech in Parliament during a similar debate on International Women's Day. In it, I paid tribute to our local history of women's struggle for social justice, which continues to be a daily source of inspiration. To quote the amazing Greta Thunberg, International Women's Day

“is for protesting against and raising awareness about the fact that people are still being oppressed or treated differently because of their gender”,

and we do still have so much to protest against.

Today's debate comes as the cost of living crisis is fostering a sense of injustice, uncertainty and anxiety across the UK, set against the brutal backdrop of the pandemic and a decade of Conservative austerity. We know that the covid-19 pandemic means women have been more likely than men to lose their jobs or to reduce their paid work, given that they are more frequently employed in sectors that have been directly disrupted by lockdown and social distancing measures.

Women—particularly black, Asian and minority ethnic women—continue to account for about two thirds of low earners and are more likely to be working on zero-hour or part-time contracts. The increased overlap of working and caring responsibilities has added to the ongoing reality that caring continues to be a major factor in women's ability to participate on equal terms. To put it simply, women still face structural economic inequality throughout their lives, and this intersects with other structures of inequality, including race and disability.

We also know that violence against women, including trans women, continues to blight our society. Women die—and they are dying—every day while support services continue to be cut. I know personally that the impact of domestic abuse on the mental health of survivors can be truly devastating, yet there continue to be many barriers and many challenges facing survivors when they try to access help. We know that ethnic minority survivors of domestic abuse suffer for one and a half times longer before seeking help. As such, we urgently need funding for services, particularly specialist community services and specialist refuges.

As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on domestic violence and abuse, I am delighted to be working with Women's Aid and others on their campaign

#DeserveToBeHeard and to argue for domestic abuse to be recognised as a public health priority. Yet while the Government invariably use the language of protecting women, their programme of austerity, real-terms cuts to benefits and pensions, and assaults on civil liberties explicitly target those of us most at risk—migrants, as well as black, Asian and minority ethnic women, and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

The cruel “no recourse to public funds” condition prevents women from accessing help when most at need, and the hostile and racist immigration system tightens around women facing deportation, imprisons women in unacceptable conditions and even sees women drown at sea when they try to seek safety. I plead with the Government today: please scrap the inhumane Nationality and Borders Bill, which risks criminalising refugees, including Ukrainian refugees, who arrive in the UK through an irregular route. Instead, the Government should ensure that there are always safe routes for those seeking sanctuary and asylum.

Too often, under this Government the very institutions that are meant to protect us are in fact failing us, over and over again. Women are told we must forget that only a year ago, Sarah Everard was killed by a serving police officer. We are expected to ignore that there is clearly a problem within the police regarding racism and misogyny which needs urgently to be addressed. Structural racism has long been identified in the police, with the 2017 Lammy review finding that arrest rates are twice as high for ethnic minority women compared with white women. That has been found to lead to increased distrust of the official support services among ethnic minority communities, leading ethnic minority women to be less likely to report experiences of violence and receive support.

International Women's Day must be about highlighting those ongoing injustices, but more than that it is about pointing the way to overcoming such wrongs. Although International Women's Day has a historical association with recognising women's oppression and exploitation, it is also a time when we highlight victories that have been won. Whether that is standing up against violence and austerity, struggling for better working conditions or demanding equal pay, women have always played a vital role in the struggle for social justice, by rallying, organising, protesting, inspiring millions of us, and winning against the odds. That includes industrial action by match workers at the Bryant and May factory in 1888, the historic strike action by female sewing machinists at the Dagenham Ford motor company in 1968, Jayaben Desai leading a walk-out at the Grunwick film processing laboratory in 1976, and Southall Black Sisters being at the forefront of challenging domestic and gender-related violence locally and nationally for decades. Yes, today is about inspiring us to overcome, and there is lots to inspire us.

I will finish by highlighting the victory secured by Unite the Union members working for Barts Health NHS Trust this month, after strike action in which black, Asian and minority ethnic women in particular played a crucial role. I applaud their bravery and determination in fighting exploitation, standing together day in, day out, in the cold and rain, demanding the change that they deserved. That landmark win sends a message to all that pay gaps and low pay are utterly unacceptable. It shows how to challenge injustice and

inequality. The message is clearer than ever before: a woman's place is in the political struggle, in her union and, yes, on the picket lines.

1.52 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I am No. 529—the 529th woman to be sworn into this great Parliament—of only 559 women ever sworn into this place, and, while improving, the statistics still have a way to go. We are ranked as the 45th country in the world for the proportion of women in Parliament, and only 36% of our councillors are women. Against that backdrop, this International Women's Day, I was delighted to join—unfortunately by Zoom—a meeting of businesswomen back home at the launch of Women in Business North Devon, many of whom are interested in stepping into public life. The event was organised by the fabulous Roshni Mahajan, sales and marketing director of Aramis Rugby, a British sports manufacturing brand that supplies top-flight rugby teams in the UK and abroad.

Roshni is just one great example of women in leadership roles that we have in North Devon, as are business leaders such as Kate Cox, CEO of Bray Leino, which is one of the largest digital marketing businesses in the UK outside London, and Paula Byers, founder and director of Lime Cloud Ltd, and chair of Digital North Devon, who also sits on multiple steering committees such as Tech South West. We have leaders in the social sector such as Sue Wallis, chief executive of the vital North Devon Against Domestic Abuse, and Rosie Bracher, a leading lawyer who specialises in complex child and family matters.

Michaela Willis came out of retirement during the first lockdown and set up the National Bereavement Partnership, which has worked tirelessly ever since, providing a support helpline, counselling referral, and a befriending service for all those suffering from bereavement, grief, living loss, mental health issues, and those affected by the global covid-19 pandemic. The amazing Suzanne Tracey leads the Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust and the Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Trust, through a crucial integration of the trusts and investment in our healthcare system. I very much hope that by highlighting those women, many of whom will be unknown in their local community, their achievements may encourage others to step up, undeterred by whatever they believe is holding them back. I send my apologies to the other brilliant women in North Devon who are not in my speech today.

As women we are wired a bit differently. We often think things through so far that we have talked ourselves out of them before even considering that we could do them. In my mind that is no wonder because there are still pockets of resistance that we need to tackle, including something as fundamental as violence against women and girls. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) will no doubt jerk tears as she recalls those so tragically taken from this life by men around them, yet on the first anniversary of the dreadful murder of Sarah Everard, I received this letter from a constituent in a position of authority. The letter was, in his words, about the,

“extensive media coverage of the Home Secretary's statement on the Government's directive to the police about keeping women and girls safe in public places and Government money being supplied for that purpose...Of course it is important that women and girls are kept safe, but this programme shows discrimination

[Selaine Saxby]

of the worst kind in that young men and boys who suffer three times the number of murders and over four times the number of violent attacks, are totally excluded. It has been compared to a campaign to keep white people safe that excludes people of colour, and it has been brought about by well-organised campaigns by feminist extremists who see females as being superior to males, even under the law."

I know that misogyny is alive and well in North Devon from the comments thrown, or even shouted at me as MP. When that has crossed from what might be considered "banter" to becoming abuse, I have taken steps to ensure that those responsible have seen the full force of the law. I hope other women will follow my lead and call out what is simply unacceptable, and I look forward to working with our fabulous police and crime commissioner, Alison Hernandez, as we work towards securing safer streets in North Devon.

As women in this place we all know the abuse that comes with the territory, and as I explained to those women on the business call this week who are thinking about stepping into public life, it is bad on social media as an MP, and somewhat less so as a councillor. However, as women we know that we are stronger when we work together, including the support that we all give to each other here when dealing with such matters, and I hope such issues never deter more women in North Devon from stepping into public life. I may be the first female MP for North Devon, but I very much hope I am not the last.

This International Women's Day is particularly poignant given the situation in Ukraine, with today's horrific scenes, and women and children leaving husbands, fathers and sons behind to fight. Many Ukrainian women have done so much, and even taken up arms themselves. In a week when we heard the President of Ukraine quote Churchill, walking down Whitehall, seeing the statue, and remembering the contribution of 7 million women in world war two, has taken on a whole new significance, with so many inspiring women on the frontline in Ukraine. Slava Ukraini—we all stand with Ukraine.

The theme of this year's International Women's Day is "break the bias", and its website describes that as working towards a "gender equal world", free of bias, stereotypes and discrimination. It is a world that is diverse, equitable, and inclusive, and where difference is valued and celebrated. Together we can forge women's equality. Collectively, we can all break the bias.

1.59 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I thank the Speaker's Office for its understanding every year in making time for me to read these names, and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for always securing the debate. This year, we are joined in the Gallery by Carole and Matt Gould and their son Zeb, and by Julie Devey. They are the families of Ellie Gould and Poppy Devey Waterhouse, whose names I read out in previous years. Both were brutally killed and taken from their families.

The act of remembrance that we undertake here every year is completely down to the work of Karen Ingala Smith and the Counting Dead Women project. She is the only person keeping this data, but her painstaking work over many years has meant that, unlike seven years ago when I first read the list, we are all more aware

of the peril of femicide. That was not the Government's doing, and they did not do the work; it was women, giving their labour away for free.

This week, I invited the families of the women I have listed over the years to come here to Parliament. I and the Labour party will be working with them to build a families manifesto for change. Each one of them had stories to tell: their daughters being murdered while their perpetrators were on bail; how their mother's killer went away only for six years because he had taken drugs before he killed her; or killings that went un-investigated because the woman had taken drugs. Today, we live in a society where the excuse used by a perpetrator who kills, to get a lighter sentence, is used to victim-blame and diminish the innocence of a woman who has been killed, in the trial of her own death.

For every name that I am about to read, there will be a story about how better mental health services, even the slightest suggestion of offender management or the availability of quick specialist victim support, would have saved their lives. The perpetrators killed, but it is on us if we keep allowing a system where women live under the requirement of giving away their labour for free in the pursuit of their own safety.

The final name on the list when I stood here last year was one that we all know. Here are the names of the women killed since that supposedly watershed moment: Karen McClean; Stacey Knell; Smita Mistry; Samantha Mills; Dyanne Mansfield; Patricia Audsley; Phyllis Nelson; Klaudia Soltys; Simone Ambler; Emma McArthur; Sherrie Teresa Milnes; Constanta Bunea; Jacqueline Grant; Loretta Herman; Sally Metcalf; Sarah Keith; Peggy Wright; Charmaine O'Donnell; Michelle Cooper; Kerry Bradford; Julia James; Beth Aspey; Susan Booth; Mayra Zulfiqar; Maria Rawlings; Chenise Gregory; Agnes Akom; Wendy Cole; Caroline Crouch; Svetlana Mihalachi; Nicola Kirk; an unnamed woman; Agita Geslere; Alison Stevenson; Lauren Wilson; Peninah Kabeba; Jill Hickery; Bethany Vincent, who was killed alongside her nine-year-old son; Leah Ware; Esther Brown; Michaela Hall; Mildred Whitmore; Stacey Clay; Linda Hood; Marlene Coleman; Sophie Cartlidge; Gracie Spinks; Kim Dearden; Michelle Hibbert, who was killed alongside her husband; Sally Poynton; Catherine Wardleworth; Sukhjit Badial; Elsie Pinder; Catherine Stewart; Ishrat Ahmed; Tamara Padi; Katie Brankin; Sandra See; Beatrice Cenus; Patricia Holland; Louise Kam; Yordanos Brhane; Amanda Selby; Malgorzata Lechanska; Megan Newborough; Diane Nichol; Maxine Davison; Kate Shepherd; Bella Nicandro; Eileen Barrott; Sharron Pickles; Helen Anderson; Jade Ward; Maddie Durdant-Hollamby; Fawziyah Javed; Ingrid Matthew; another unnamed woman; Sabina Nessa; Terri Harris, who was killed alongside her two children John and Lacey Bennett, and Lacey's friend Connie Gent, who was there for a sleepover; Sukhjeet Uppal; Norma Girolami; Jekouki Jaboa; Nicole Hurley; Bonnie Harwood; Katrina Rainey; Marta Chmielecka; Ruth Dent; Josephine Smith; Dawn Walker; Yvonne Barr; Sarah Ashwell; Tamby Dowling; Pauline Quinn; Ilona Golabek; Alexandra Morgan; Tricia Livesey and her partner Anthony Tipping; Bobbi-Anne McLeod; Bori Benko; Jennifer Chapple and her husband Stephen; June Fox-Roberts; Malak Adabzadeh; Fernanda; Amber Gibson; Lily Sullivan; Caoimhe Morgan; Julia Howse; Beverley Taylor and John Taylor; Mary Fell and her husband; Kirsty Ashley; Brenda Blainey; Judith Armstrong; Freda Walker; Marlene Doyle; Yasmin Chkaifi; Lucy Powell, my constituent,

who was killed at the age of 21; Marena Shaban; Lesma Jackson; Ashley Wadsworth; Charissa Brown; Katy Harris; Nicola Shaba; Dawn Trusler; and Valerie Warrington, alongside her husband.

I want to mention the names of four other women. Three women have been killed in the last month where no suspect has yet been charged. They are: Clair Ablewhite; Valerie Freer; and Naomi Hunte. Finally, a mention for Jomaa Jerrare, whose body was dumped and set on fire in a layby last August. Nobody has been charged with her murder.

Many women like Jomaa do not appear on our lists because no one is ever charged with their killing or because they die by staged homicide in a sudden death by falling from a building, overdose or suicide and we never look into the history of domestic abuse in their cases. The list is painfully long, but in reality it is much longer. We can make it shorter. Let us act faster.

2.7 pm

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): The quality of the silence that accompanies the reading out of those names is always moving and compels us to change. I commend the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for her work. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on opening the debate and leading on this important issue. Sadly, we need to keep leading, following and working to change the world. Seeing the televised images of the bombing of a maternity hospital speaks of such unimaginable evil, and surely that must compel the world to see things differently.

I am pleased to speak today as the 448th woman in Parliament. I did endeavour to find out from the House of Commons Library the number of men elected thus far so that we could see how much ground we must cover to begin to catch up, but that figure is still being sought. I am pleased none the less to be No. 448. I echo the hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) in paying tribute to my mum, who was born into poverty in 1930s Glasgow and outperformed her start in life by dint of her fierce personality. She changed the world for me, and she is my staunchest supporter, too.

I would like to pay tribute today to some of the amazing women in my constituency, who all, in their own way, are showing a better world and inspiring younger women to take their place. I will speak a little about the political scene. Although I see women excelling and coming forward in strong numbers across all sorts of different sectors—not least during the pandemic, when behind the amazing Pfizer and AstraZeneca success, women were very much leading the way—the issue of role models still exists, and that includes, in politics, how difficult it sometimes is to inspire other women to stand. The comments from my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) underpin why that challenge has become so difficult.

A few years ago, in my first term, I experienced a death threat and a court case. Women in my constituency have seen and still see what I go through—I am facing exactly the same situation again—and I reach out to them because their contribution to local government could be immense. They would bring tremendous experience and insight and they would be a power of good, but can I persuade them to stand? No. Even though we have really powerful role models, there is work to be done.

I welcome the work on the online harms Bill, which I know will start to make a real difference in that sphere. Until then, it is for women to show the way.

I recently met Dr Amal, who was the first Speaker in the United Arab Emirates—indeed, the first Speaker in the Arab world. What an incredible role model she is. With her dignity, grace and courage, she is truly world-changing. Interestingly, in terms of her position and contribution, she paid tribute to the men in her life, and I would like to echo that. She paid tribute to her husband, her father and her sons, who have been her staunchest supporters. She said—there is some relevance here today—that behind many good women, there are often good men, and I offer the example of my colleagues today. Although women are showing a strong lead, we need to move together and it will take all of us to do that.

Let me turn to the women in my constituency who have all been honoured in the past year. First, there is Dorit Oliver-Wolff—an octogenarian now, but unstoppable. She is a Holocaust survivor who has dedicated all her years to education and to reaching younger generations to inspire in them a message about how they can play their part in making the world a better place. She speaks even now and led on our Holocaust Memorial Day event. She is a published author and was a pop star in her younger years. Her defiance and commitment to a better world are unparalleled.

I will also profile Laura Murphy at The WayfinderWoman Trust. Run by women for women, it helps those who are feeling anxious and uncertain about themselves or their future. By building self-confidence and skills, it enables them to challenge the barriers that are facing them and to break the bias. It has been hugely impactful for women right across my constituency and beyond.

I will also mention the award winners Lucy Butt and Hollin Preston, who launched Bramber Bakehouse, which, again, was award-winning this year. Bramber—this is a very nice connection for us here in Parliament—was the constituency of William Wilberforce, who is one of my personal heroes for his work around slavery. Bramber Bakehouse provides baking, wellbeing and employability programmes for female survivors of human trafficking, equipping and empowering them.

With such women leading in all sorts of ways, I feel confident that the world can be a better place. Eastbourne is a better place for their work and we will hear more and more examples today of how women are really taking the lead and making the difference. We wish them all every success.

2.14 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): This is the fifth International Women's Day debate since I was elected in 2017, the fifth time that I have sat here to listen to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) read out the names of women killed in the last year, and the seventh time that she has read that horrific list compiled by our friend Karen Ingala Smith as part of her Counting Dead Women project. This year's list is even longer than the last, but with several cases yet unsolved and many yet to go through court, that vile list and those grim statistics will sadly only increase.

It seems that those 125 men clearly have not been listening. They clearly did not hear as women around the world said, "Enough." They did not see or hear those

[*Rosie Duffield*]

women at the vigils for Sarah and were not listening as we debated in this place and spoke about women's rage and pain and what it is like to live in fear. We can add those men to the many whose victims were included in the work of artist Wilma Woolf, who visited Parliament this week. Her decorated dinner plates show women killed by men, listed by year and with a symbol to indicate how they met their deaths. Those symbols show a grim range of causes, from strangulation to being burnt, poisoned, drowned, shot, pushed from a balcony, decapitated and so on.

Wilma says of her work, made in conjunction with the Femicide Census, that it is designed to remember the women who have needlessly lost their lives and to highlight the institutionalised and systemic acceptance of this human rights abuse, which is often regarded as an inevitable part of men and women co-existing. The Femicide Census states that

"there is little suggestion that any intervention over the past ten years has had a significant impact or even any impact at all on the number of women being killed by men."

This, then, is surely now an absolute emergency.

In the last couple of weeks alone, we have talked about this crisis of violence against women and girls—violence, rape, murder, whether at home or in a war zone. This violence affects 51% of the population—women who work, women who vote, women watching as we fail to do anything at all to reduce these horrific statistics.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Does the hon. Member agree that in some walks of life, such as the armed forces, women face even greater barriers to receiving support for domestic violence and harassment, and that the Government should work to ensure that there is parity so that the right support is offered to all women?

Rosie Duffield: I thank the hon. Member for that point; I absolutely agree.

What do women have to do? Should we collectively go on strike, stand still, lay down, leave our workplaces and homes or stand in the road or the motorway, silently disengaging with the systems and society that refuse to see or hear our rage? This is not a political hot potato; it is about society. Our representatives here have to lead, demand change and show change. It is our duty. Men need to know that without question or exception, this will not be tolerated and that nothing at all awaits them if they hurt or kill women apart from a prison cell.

Families of victims visited us here this week, again, thanks to my heroic hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley. Their pain at the loss of their loved ones has been made worse by layers of injustice, keeping those wounds as raw as when they first heard that devastating news. These injustices would shock most people, such as the killer of their daughter, sister or mother still having control of her money or access to her children; or the fact that he raped her not being included in the charge sheet or factored into the sentencing decision. We have to do better, and this all has to change urgently through drastic action, changes to our courts, police and legal systems—whatever it takes. We should demand this on behalf of women in the UK, and I am demanding this as someone whose name could once have been read out by my hon. Friend.

Let us show that we are listening and making these lists shorter every year. I pray that next International Women's Day, we do not have to be as angry, that we are celebrating change, hope and, above all, freedom for the incredibly brave women of Ukraine.

2.19 pm

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on initiating this important debate. As ever, it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) and the many hon. Members who have spoken so movingly about the women in Ukraine and women facing the most severe violence in this country.

In the spirit of this year's theme "Break the Bias", I want to focus my remarks on girls and women in science, maths and tech careers. I want to start by telling two stories. Born in 1815, Ada Lovelace was the child of poet Lord Byron and mathematician Lady Byron, and had a passion for mathematics from an early age. Despite childhood illness, Ada let nothing hold her back. Aged 12, she decided she wanted to fly. She examined the anatomy of birds and explored the best materials to create herself a set of wings. As a teenager—at just 18—she was working with mathematician Charles Babbage on one of the very first computers, almost 200 years ago. Despite later marrying and becoming a countess, Ada did not give up her passion for a life of leisure, and her work on the analytical engine means that she is widely recognised as one of the world's first computer programmers.

Half a century after Ada was born, Agnes Pockels was born in Germany. She could not study at university like her brother because women were not allowed to at the time, and she had sick parents at home and therefore a lot of caring responsibilities. Stuck at home carrying out all the household chores, which I am sure we will all recognise, Agnes noticed soap building on the surface of her washing water. Aged 18, she began conducting experiments at home to understand more, and although she was locked out of accessing scientific literature, this did not stop Agnes. In 1891 she published her first scientific paper "Surface Tension" and she is now recognised as a pioneer in the field of surface science.

If we ask ourselves why we are here today, it is because women have historically been disenfranchised, disempowered and devalued.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The hon. Lady is bringing to our attention a very interesting woman who made a lot of scientific progress. Does she know about Caroline Herschel? Together with her brother, she was an astronomer. She did more work than him, but her work was not recognised. Does she agree that we need to sing the praises of women from the past as much as possible?

Claire Coutinho: I agree. There are so many we could mention today—including Rosalind Franklin—whose work was not properly recognised at the time and whom we should recognise now.

Women have been shut out of the room where decisions are made and locked out of the jobs with the highest returns. I am glad that today we can celebrate much progress since the time of Ada and Agnes, but the fact is that women are still playing catch-up after centuries and centuries of inequality. PhD computer and data scientists are powering the economy, creating new billion-dollar

companies in life sciences, artificial intelligence, fintech, health tech and beyond. Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg—three of the richest people on the planet—were all STEM students and they now lead companies that are shaping the world around us, with arguably more power and certainly more wealth than our political leaders. In the years ahead the new Wall Street is going to be a wet lab.

We know that STEM subjects are some of the highest value added courses for future earnings. We also know that demand is surging for people to fill new high-quality tech and data science jobs. This field is now where the decisions are being taken and where the high-return jobs are being created. I want women to get their fair slice of the economic pie so that we are not playing catch-up in the decades to come.

Since 2010, under successive Conservative Governments, the number of women accepted on full-time STEM undergraduate courses in the UK has increased by almost 50%, but women still remain deeply under-represented in STEM subjects. Girls are only half as likely as boys to say that their strongest subject is science or maths, despite the fact that we know that they now regularly outperform boys in these subjects. A Girlguiding survey last year showed that over half of 11 to 21-year-old girls and women said that they felt that STEM subjects were more for the boys. Only 14.5% of engineers are women, and only 13% of STEM workers at management level are women. This is bias at work, and for the future of equality in this country we need to break it. There could not be a better time.

The success of the covid vaccine roll-out is an inspiration to so many young women in this country, who want to be the next Kate Bingham, Professor Sarah Gilbert or Dr Emily Lawson—or perhaps the next Ada Lovelace or Agnes Pockels. Luckily, today we live in an open society where women can access the world of academia, science and enterprise. However, we are still fighting centuries of bias. That is why I am delighted to be working with our fantastic Children's Commissioner Dame Rachel de Souza to encourage more women into advanced mathematical courses in particular. We will be hosting a roundtable later this month, so if any fellow Members are interested, please do get in touch. It is of the utmost importance to ensure that in the centuries ahead women are not playing catch-up once again.

2.24 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is always a privilege to speak in this debate, and I thank the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for bringing it forward year on year.

Despite the great progress made by the women who have come before us, women today are still subject to huge economic, social and political inequalities right across the world. Intersectional inequalities in particular should be highlighted here today. In its 2020 report and recommendations, the First Minister's national advisory council on women and girls defined intersectionality as "a framework for understanding how multiple categories of identity, such as gender, race and class, interact in ways that create complex systems in terms of oppression and power."

How must it feel to be a woman who is disabled or of colour in the world today, even here in the UK? We know that disabled women are often disproportionately impacted by many of the inequalities experienced here.

The Glasgow Disability Alliance has spoken of the triple whammy facing disabled women today—from being disabled, being a woman and dealing with the impact of covid-19. An estimated 19% of women over 18 have a disability, compared with 12% of men. It is astonishing, and difficult to comprehend. Women, and disabled women in particular, face great bias and disadvantage in the workplace. Measures such as the right to call for flexible working from the start of employment would benefit those people, and benefit women generally, because women—let us be honest here—have a hugely disproportionate share of caring responsibilities, making it difficult for some of them to maintain or even take on work.

Women are also more likely to miss out on things like statutory sick pay. The UK, as we all know, has one of the lowest sick pay rates in the OECD, and this means that many women are not eligible for it—even women on maternity pay. So this might be a good place and time to call for an urgent overhaul of the wholly inadequate SSP system.

Crucial and long-awaited reforms to employment law are needed to keep caregivers—mainly women—and disabled women in the workplace and ensure that they get the support that they need to stay in work should they choose to do so. Disabled women are also disproportionately impacted by gender-based violence, and I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips)—but I do not want to thank her; I want her not to have to do this year on year. We know that domestic violence and abuse are often under-reported. The World Health Organisation has estimated that around a third of women globally will be subjected to physical or sexual violence in their lifetime.

In 2017 the UN cited research estimating that disabled women experience domestic violence at twice the rate of other women and experience violence specifically because they are disabled. This has to stop. In Scotland there is a programme called "Equally Safe", which is our strategy for preventing and eradicating violence against women and girls, focused on the need for prevention of violence. We need to make their priorities—achieving greater gender equality, intervening early and effectively and tackling perpetrators—things that happen as a matter of course right across the UK. We must continue to press for legislation to tackle gender-based violence, especially against women—it does happen to men as well, and we should never forget that.

Today we are all thinking of Ukraine, and showing solidarity with the women there. How many of us will ever forget the sight of a pregnant woman being stretched out of a hospital? This has to stop. There are many things that we can do, and I am going to make a personal plea to the Minister at this point, although I know it is not her responsibility. We cannot have people sitting at borders waiting to cross them. We have all acknowledged that the majority of refugees in Ukraine are women and girls; we have seen pictures of them at borders saying farewell to their men who are going back to fight. We should not be making people wait to come here. I would also call for article 11 of the United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities to be taken into account as part of someone's refugee status to help them to come here sooner.

All of us here, especially the women, have often been asked to give advice to young women who want to enter public life. I have been asked—and I had to think about

[*Marion Fellows*]

it—how I got started. Well, I got started because a man stood down as a branch convenor and no one else would do it. I thought, “Here I go”, and I put myself forward, because I had been badly treated in a previous employment. The way I did it was this: I had to think of myself putting on a hat which would make me a different Marion; a Marion who could say and do things that I would normally not be able to say and do. I have given that advice to young women, but what I would really like to be able to say is “Ditch the hat; just cut the bias.” Let us do this on equal terms without having to build ourselves up to do it.

2.31 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (*Marion Fellows*) for that inspiring close to her speech. I do not wish to disabuse her in any way, but I think she will find that quite a lot of men do quite a lot of pretending too. We may cover it up better, but the hon. Lady gave the right advice: everyone is better if they are just themselves, and we are better if we feel empowered to be ourselves.

This should be a debate in which we celebrate the re-empowerment of women. I say “re-empowerment” because there is now some evidence suggesting that in prehistoric societies women were not disempowered or subjected to male patriarchy. However, recent progress is being thrown into reverse, and not just by terrible wars and by that terrible list that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (*Jess Phillips*) reads out every year. In particular, the rights of women to women-only safe spaces are threatened—safe spaces such as public toilets, women’s hospital wards and women’s prisons.

Nearly all violence against women is committed by men, but there is a new and growing category of violence against women committed by people who call themselves women but are biologically male. We should always respond positively to people with genuine gender dysphoria, and I deliver this speech with kindness in my heart, but the Sexual Offences Act 2003 defines rape as when a person

“intentionally penetrates the vagina, anus or mouth of another person...with his penis”

without consent. The Crown Prosecution Service reports that between 2012 and 2018 more than 436 cases of rape were recorded as being committed by women. The penis is a male organ, so these rapes are committed by men presenting themselves as women.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Hear, hear.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Bastions of feminism—and I hear one on the other side of the House—who highlight this risk, and others such as Germaine Greer, Professor Kathleen Stock and Professor Jo Phoenix, and journalists such as Suzanne Moore, are bullied online and even hounded out of their jobs because they talk about this. But we, as legislators, must be clear and courageous about what a man is and what a woman is.

Today’s interim report from the independent review of gender identity services for children and young people by Dr Hilary Cass notes the rapid increase in the number of adolescent girls presenting with gender distress. It states:

“At present we have the least information for the largest group of patients—birth registered females first presenting in early teen years”.

It is essential that we understand why we are witnessing this historically unprecedented number of young girls who are finding puberty so difficult to navigate. The Government’s proposed conversion therapy Bill must be reviewed in the light of this, and we must wait until the full report comes out before we present the Bill for Second Reading.

It is a scientific fact that our biological sex is immutable. Professor Lord Winston said on the BBC’s “Question Time”:

“I will say this categorically—that you cannot change your sex. Your sex actually is there in every single cell in the body.”

The responsibility for clarity starts with us as legislators. We have to be clear about what words mean in our legislation—but, astonishingly, some of us are reluctant to be clear. A woman is an adult female human. Only this week, the hon. Member for Oxford East (*Anneliese Dodds*) was asked to define a woman on the media, and she was unable, or unwilling, to give a clear answer.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I would like to ask the hon. Member for evidence for the statement he has just made. I would like him to provide a transcript of my comments—any quotes that he can find anywhere that would indicate that at any point I have not been clear about what a woman is. It is quite easy for me, given that I am a woman.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I have not furnished myself with a quote, but I am very happy to write to the hon. Lady. I can promise her that she did not answer the question when she was asked it.

Anneliese Dodds: I am afraid it appears that the hon. Member may not have followed the evidence concerning what I stated. Perhaps he has consulted social media rather than looking at what I actually did state. I hope he will withdraw the comment he has just made.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: If I have misled the House by misrepresenting the hon. Lady, I absolutely apologise for doing so. I will check the facts, and I will set the record straight if it is necessary for me to do so.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I have just looked up the quote from the hon. Member for Oxford East (*Anneliese Dodds*). It may well be that she can clarify this. She was trying to explain the Labour party’s official definition of a woman, but she was asked for her own definition of a woman. She said:

“with respect...I think it does depend what the context is surely.”

She was not giving a clear personal definition, but perhaps she is able to do so now.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I will give way to the hon. Lady if she will give a clear definition.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. This has been a very good-natured debate so far, and it may now be useful if we just move on.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: There have been others representing the Opposition Front Bench, Mr Deputy Speaker, who have said things like “I am not going to go down that rabbit hole.” Indeed, the Leader of the Opposition said on “Marr” that the phrase “only women have a cervix” “is something that shouldn’t be said. It is not right.”

This is a strange way to stand up for women’s rights.

The Government must reply to this debate with clear definitions of “man” and “woman”, as enshrined in the Equality Act 2010. They must commit to preventing biological men, whatever identity they claim and with whatever sincerity they claim that identity, from gaining access to women-only safe spaces. If they do not, the Government are failing to protect women.

Anneliese Dodds: Is the hon. Member aware that I referred in my remarks to the Equality Act, which makes that provision for single-sex spaces, and that I have done so repeatedly? It appears that he was not aware of that. I have no problem with criticism when it is on the basis of what I have done, but with respect, I do have a problem with criticism on the basis of things I have not done, particularly during this debate.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I was not actually talking about the hon. Lady at that particular point, but she has put on record what she feels, and maybe when she replies to the debate she will give us a definition of what she thinks a woman is.

The Government must also challenge the Scottish Parliament’s proposed Gender Recognition Reform Bill, because it intends to endow all UK citizens with new controversial rights that have not been approved by this Parliament. That was never the intention of the devolution settlement. Anyone from any part of the UK would be able to acquire a gender recognition certificate in Scotland with no medical diagnosis. They could then change the sex on their birth certificate and so gain the right to use women-only safe spaces. That is completely unacceptable.

Mrs Miller: I absolutely respect my hon. Friend’s right to make the speech that he is making, but he refers to safety in women-only spaces. Can he be clear in his remarks that for more than 10 years under the Equality Act, organisations such as Women’s Aid and Refuge have been ensuring that those spaces are absolutely safe by using risk assessments on everybody who uses them, whether they are men or women or indeed people who may be trans. This issue, while important, is already being practically dealt with by those organisations.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I am afraid that a great many women do not agree with my right hon. Friend, and I am speaking for them.

Joanna Cherry: Following on from that point, does the hon. Gentleman agree that there has been some confusion in the past about the extent to which single-sex services can be provided under the Equality Act, and that the planned updated guidance from the Equality and Human Rights Commission will be very welcome?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for that intervention, and I note what she says.

The SNP Minister Shona Robison said when she was introducing the Bill:

“There is no evidence that predatory and abusive men have ever had to pretend to be anything else to carry out abusive and predatory behaviour.”—[*Scottish Parliament Official Report*, 3 March 2022; c. 65.]

That comment really misses the point. The point is that the Bill does create new opportunities for predatory men and I am afraid that my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) has to accept that there are plenty of instances where biological men have taken advantage of this new freedom being granted them, to the detriment of the safety of women.

Wera Hobhouse: I just want to clarify this point. Because there are some predatory men who will always find loopholes for violence, is that a reason for not protecting the most vulnerable people that we have—that is, the transgender community?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I do not follow what the hon. Lady is saying. I am in favour of protecting the trans community in this country. What I am not in favour of is allowing biological men into women’s spaces where they can threaten women as a matter of right, however risk-assessed they might be. I do not know how you risk-assess somebody going into a public toilet or into other women-only safe spaces. The fact is that women are taking flight from the political parties that are supporting this kind of agenda. At least the Conservative party can be a safe haven for them if we stand up and speak for women.

2.43 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): I would like to say that it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), but actually it is not. It is unfortunate that he chose today to make his views known to us. I found them most unhelpful and out of step with today’s debate. It is a real pity that he did not use this opportunity to celebrate women, rather than take more time than any woman has taken today to make his speech.

I would like to start my contribution by reflecting on the shared and collective experiences of working class women in the Jarrow constituency over the last 90 years. As this country recovers from the covid-19 pandemic, I am reminded of the history of struggle that my constituency has faced in the past, and of how, despite being generations apart, the struggles of unemployment in the 1930s are difficult to separate from the aftermath of the covid-19 pandemic. It is important to note—and relevant to this debate—how both of those struggles have predominantly impacted working-class women.

For women in my constituency, the covid-19 pandemic has brought back economic and social circumstances that would not look out of place in the 1930s. Throughout the 1930s, it was women who suffered socially as a result of endemic unemployment and it was they who had to face the landlord, the butcher and the greengrocer as they had to manage a home on a significantly lower income. Ninety years later, throughout the coronavirus pandemic, when I look at the livelihoods of some in my constituency and the withdrawal of vital support and rising food and energy prices, it feels like history is beginning to repeat itself.

During the pandemic, support schemes such as the job retention scheme and the self-employment income support scheme overlooked the existing inequalities

[Kate Osborne]

that women face in the labour market at a time when women took on the majority of home schooling and childcare, regardless of whether they were in paid employment or not. The Office for National Statistics has reported that since the start of, and at every point during, the pandemic, women reported significantly higher anxiety than men, with women being 1.3 times lonelier. A report from the Institute for Public Policy Research from April 2021 shockingly reported a 62% increase in the number of women disclosing that they had experienced sexual violence in the first four months of the pandemic. In the north-east alone, there was a 179% increase in reports from women of abuse.

When society grappled with the issues faced by 1930s unemployment, which peaked at 80% in Jarrow, the national Government targeted the poor through the means test. When this country faced the unprecedented economic effects of the covid-19 pandemic, this Tory Government made the choice to withdraw the £20 increase to universal credit. All those actions, past and present, have one common dominator: for the people in my constituency, they have had a disproportionate effect on working class and marginalised women. As we rightly reflect on the great successes and the battles that have been won by generations gone by in the fight for women's and girls' rights, I would like to remind the House of how critical it is as we mark International Women's Day that we remember the responsibility we have in this House for how our actions here impact on all the women in our constituencies, and of the battle to get women into this place. On this, the late, great socialist Ellen Wilkinson said:

"Women have worked hard; starved in prison; given of their time and lives that we might sit in the House of Commons and take part in the legislating of this country."

I would like to personally say how fantastic it is that, in my local area, the leader and deputy leader of South Tyneside local authority, the Member for a neighbouring constituency—my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck)—and the local police and crime commissioner are positions all represented by women. I was proud to stand on Labour's 2019 manifesto, which sought to address some of the imbalances in our society that I have referred to, particularly with the commitment to close the gender pay gap by 2030, the demand that all workplaces have a menopause policy and the policy that survivors of domestic abuse would be entitled to 10 days of paid leave. Those much-needed policies have unfortunately been largely ignored and have faded away as we enter the current post-pandemic political world. They are policies that have never been more needed.

My constituency is full of outstanding, brave and inspirational women, from doctors and nurses in our NHS to volunteers in our food banks, from teachers in our schools to workers in our shops, and in so many other positions both voluntary and paid. Women contribute so much to our communities, and they are often on low pay and in insecure work. On International Women's Day, I say thank you to them.

I commit to all the women in my constituency and beyond to continue holding this Government to account on all issues, but none more so than those issues that so often have a disproportionate impact on women and girls.

2.49 pm

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on securing this debate. She is a leader among women, and I thank her personally for all the help and support she has given to me since I was elected in 2019. Thank you very much.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) made an extremely moving speech in which she read out a very long list of women who have been murdered over the last year. I would add the name of a woman from my Loughborough constituency who was not murdered but suffered life-changing injuries at the age of 19 that mean she will never again live a normal life. Her name is Angel Lynn, and hon. Members will perhaps have seen the CCTV video of her being picked up by her boyfriend and physically carried into the back of a van. She was kidnapped and, to use the words of the court, "fell out" of the van at high speed on the A6 in Loughborough.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I remind the hon. Lady that this case is sub judice.

Jane Hunt: No, it is not.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is the advice I have received, so please be very careful. The Attorney General has referred the sentence as being too lenient.

Jane Hunt: I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Since it was first observed in 1911, International Women's Day has been a driving force for change. It is a day not only to empower women and celebrate their achievements but to raise awareness of equality issues and the very real injustices that women still face today. This year is no exception, with the theme of "Break the Bias" encouraging us all to call out gender bias, discrimination and stereotyping to ensure greater female participation and progression in our communities, our workplaces and our schools, colleges and universities.

As an MP, I am incredibly fortunate to be able to use my experiences as a woman in the workplace and as a mother, as well as the experiences of the thousands of women in my constituency, to help influence the change that is needed. Sadly, however, I am in a very small minority of women who have had this opportunity, being the 499th female of only 559 to have ever been sworn into the House of Commons—this is, of course, fewer than the number of MPs elected at any one election.

Thankfully, we are seeing the number of female MPs increase, with 220 women elected at the last election, which is the most ever. That said, it means that only 34% of MPs are women, despite the 2011 census finding that 51% of the population are women. There is clearly a lot more work still to do to ensure women are properly represented.

Margaret Ferrier: Does the hon. Lady agree that we all have a part to play, men included, in getting women elected? Former councillor Gordon Clark encouraged me to stand for election, and I will be forever grateful that he did. Men can use their platform and voice to further equality in these spaces, too.

Jane Hunt: I absolutely agree. Councillor Richard Shepherd of Charnwood Borough Council encouraged me to stand as a candidate for the Conservative party.

If we want to increase the number of women in public life generally, we must ensure we are leading from the front. I know this is of particular importance to the Government, the Opposition and the House, and I welcome that, over the last decade, there has been a real focus on removing the barriers faced by women who want to become an MP and enter government, most recently with the introduction of the Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances Act 2021, which will ensure that women are not forced to choose between becoming a mother and progressing in their career.

The importance of having more women in Parliament cannot be overstated; not only do women have a unique perspective on society and the workplace, but they have been responsible for, and instrumental in, some incredibly important pieces of legislation, such as those banning female genital mutilation, criminalising domestic violence and ensuring that women can build up pension entitlement in their own right. They also help to inspire the next generation of female politicians and women in public life. I was inspired to get into politics after hearing that our first female Prime Minister had taken office, causing me to investigate what that meant for our country and understanding that politics is a profession for women—I was 13 at the time.

As well as in Parliament, it is crucial that we have female representation in all walks of life, particularly in the workplace and the boardroom. I am delighted that progress has been made in that area, with the UK having the highest women in work index score in the G7 and being second in the international rankings for female board representation. However, there are still more barriers to remove if we are to create an environment where women can really progress, such as bias around pay and promotion, unacceptable workplace cultures, and issues with the ability to balance work and caring responsibilities, which all too often fall disproportionately on women. I know that the Government are committed to tackling those issues and I am fully supportive of the action we are already taking, for it is vital that we support women in the workplace.

I am talking about women such as the impressive managers and leaders I met last year at Tarmac, in my constituency, who were incredibly skilled experts, leading the way in their respective fields. Whether they are nurturing, shaping business or developing projects and goals, women have a great contribution to make and I urge us all to work together to ensure that women have the opportunity to put their stamp on local communities, businesses and the future of this country.

2.56 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): This week, I attended a meeting with the brave Ukrainian women politicians at the British Inter-Parliamentary Union to discuss the humanitarian impact that war has on women and girls. News last night that the war criminal Putin now bombs maternity hospitals fills us all with disgust—this is clearly a war crime. Yesterday, I chaired an event with six brave Afghan women to discuss the regressive impact the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has had on women's and girls' rights. One told me:

“Before the Taliban takeover I was someone. The day after the Taliban took over I was no one.”

It was clear from the meeting that any engagement with the Taliban must be done on the basis of strict conditionality in support of women's and girls' rights in public services, employment and civil society. I wish to take this opportunity to express my solidarity with those and other women in the world living in war zones or under repressive regimes.

Today, however, I wish to talk about access to reproductive healthcare, which has been crucial in the improvement of women's rights globally. The development of the contraceptive pill in the middle of the 20th century is considered one of the most crucial developments in the women's rights movement; reproductive rights are fundamental to the physical, psychological and social wellbeing of women. I am chair of the all-party group on sexual and reproductive health in the UK, and we know that there are still too many obstacles facing women in accessing this vital healthcare. One woman recently said:

“I find it very difficult to find a clinic that's accessible and has appointments out of office hours.”

Figures from University College London, published last year, show that the proportion of unplanned pregnancies in the UK has almost doubled during the pandemic. There is still much work to do to ensure that women and girls have full control over their reproductive health. In 2020, the all-party group published the findings of our inquiry into access to contraception. We found that women are finding it increasingly difficult to access contraception that suits them, and this is a situation made much worse by the pandemic. Even in today's *The Guardian* there is an article by Nell Frizzell entitled

“A 10-week wait for a coil? British women are facing a quiet crisis in contraceptive care”.

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): I want to put on record that one reason why women are finding it increasingly difficult to access contraception easily is that we have a number of commissioning funding streams in the NHS, which is leading to under-commissioning of this vital resource. At a time when perhaps one in three pregnancies are unplanned, which is leading to more abortions, which are themselves a less safe method of dealing with reproductive health than contraception, will the right hon. Lady join me in encouraging the Government to look properly at how contraception is commissioned?

Dame Diana Johnson: Absolutely. I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for all the work she has done; she took a particular interest in this issue when she was a Health Minister. That brings me to my next point: despite practitioners' best efforts, covid-19 exacerbated existing problems—including long-standing funding cuts and the fragmentation in commissioning structures to which the hon. Lady just referred—leading to further restrictions to access.

The public health grant has faced serious cuts over the past decade. Evidence presented to our inquiry suggested that sexual and reproductive health budgets were cut by £81.2 million—12%—between 2015 and 2017-18. It is estimated that during the same period contraceptive budgets were cut by £25.9 million, or 13%. In Hull, where my constituency is, spending on contraception has fallen by 38% since 2013-14, and almost half of councils have reduced the number of sites that deliver contraceptive services in at least one of the years since 2015.

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

Our inquiry heard that long-acting reversible contraception fittings have been most severely impacted. In 2018-19, 11% of councils reduced the number of contracts with GPs to fit LARCs, and GPs are not adequately funded to provide LARC, which disincentivises their provision. The disparity among regions is stark. In my city, the rate for GPs prescribing LARC is only 2.1 women per 100,000; whereas in other parts of the country it is 51.5 women per 100,000. Access issues have particularly hit marginalised groups, with services reporting a drop in the number of young, black, Asian and minority ethnic people requesting the services.

As we continue to emerge from the pandemic, we have a unique opportunity to reshape contraceptive services according to the needs of women. For example, we should offer contraception as part of maternity services. If we integrated care around the needs of individuals, women would be able to have all their reproductive health needs met at a single point of care. I hope that those points, and the recommendations from our report, are reflected in the Government's upcoming sexual and reproductive health strategy.

I wish to finish by talking about telemedicine for early medical abortion. I am absolutely furious at the Government's decision to end telemedicine for early medical abortions after 30 August, ignoring the clinical evidence and advice of many royal colleges and clinicians. I am sorry that the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), who was in her place earlier, has left the Chamber, because I wanted her in particular to hear my comments on this issue.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I agree entirely with the right hon. Lady. Like me, she will welcome the fact that Wales is continuing the arrangement that I understand is to be drawn to an end in England in September. That leads to questions in Wales as to why it is being permitted. There are really serious questions, particularly on this day, about why the Government here are bringing the arrangement to an end at the end of covid.

Dame Diana Johnson: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Lady. Let me clear, so we are all aware in the Chamber, that telemedicine for early medical abortion services has enabled thousands of women to access care at home via both pills being posted to them following a telephone consultation with a qualified nurse or midwife. The evidence from the medical community is absolutely crystal clear. A study of more than 50,000 abortions before and after the change in England and Wales, published by the *British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* in February 2021, concluded that telemedical abortion provision is

“effective, safe, acceptable, and improves access to care”.

Evidence also shows that telemedicine means women can access an abortion much earlier in their pregnancy, with 40% of abortions provided at less than six weeks.

As well as the consensus in the medical community, women—including the influential Mumsnet—also support the continuation of telemedicine for abortion services. An independent poll of more than 1,100 women throughout the UK, commissioned by the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare, shows that a clear majority want telemedicine for early medical abortion to remain.

As the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) said, the Welsh Government have announced that they will make the pathway permanently available in Wales. I therefore struggle to see how the decision to end this service in August is in line with the Government's commitment to put women at the centre of their own healthcare, as set out in the vision for the women's health strategy. It is simply based on the Health Minister's own prejudice. It is deeply disappointing and it flies in the face of all the other measures that have been taken within the NHS around virtual appointments and to use digital technology.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments on this matter; she is making a really powerful point. Does she feel, as I do, that this is sending a message that the Government do not trust women to make their own decisions about their own reproductive health?

Dame Diana Johnson: The Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee puts that very well. That is exactly the message that is being sent out. I notice that time is going by, so I will conclude.

I, alongside many parliamentary colleagues across the House and in the other place, medical bodies and women's groups, such as the British Medical Association, the Royal College of General Practitioners and Women's Aid, are calling on the Government now to explain exactly how they will review this decision, as they have promised to do. Where access to reproductive healthcare is limited, there is a ripple effect on the health and social wellbeing of women and girls. We must continue to stand up for the rights of women to have full control over our own health and our own bodies. We still, apparently, have some way to go to achieve that.

3.6 pm

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for securing this debate, which is always moving, inspiring and wide-ranging.

We have quite rightly reflected on the horror that Putin's war in Ukraine is inflicting on women there, which was demonstrated in last night's barbaric bombing of a maternity hospital. The haunting speech of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) reminds us—as it does every year—of the many women who are not with us to celebrate International Women's Day today. Among them this year is my constituent Clair Abelwhite whose murder has shocked the rural community of Colston Bassett in Rushcliffe. The case is ongoing and an arrest has just been made, so I will not be discussing it any further today, but I did want to put it on record that my thoughts and prayers are with her friends and family, especially with her small children.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) also brought up the achievements of women in STEM, and I will be asking her to feature in my campaign for British Science Week next week, when we are profiling some of the brilliant women who have STEM careers, and I hope to encourage more women and girls into those.

Today, I want to celebrate the achievements of an incredible group of women—female entrepreneurs—whose energy, dynamism, creativity and sheer bloody hard work create new jobs and grow our economy. The UK

set a new record last year: 140,000 women started their own businesses. In total, 20% of new firms are now led by women, but—and there is a but—it is estimated that only 1% of venture capital goes to female entrepreneurs.

I want to call out two brilliant women in Rushcliffe—Sarah King and Claire Dunn of “we are radikl”. They decided that this had gone on for far too long and are trying to do something about it. As the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) proved in her speech, if you want something done, get a woman to do it. They have started their “Over Being Underfunded” campaign to increase access to investment for female entrepreneurs. I went to see them last week—they have an office just down the road from mine. My right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) said that she loved a rebel. Well, they have a brilliant piece of artwork on their wall, which is called, “Rebels get results”. It is a fabulous print and I am looking at purchasing a copy for the Chief Whip, who, I am sure, will be delighted with it.

Their campaign has three main asks. The first is to extend the current timeframe from two years to three to secure the investment that is offered to entrepreneurs via the Government’s seed enterprise investment scheme. That extension would reflect, on average, the greater amount of time that women spend on caring responsibilities—it was twice as much as men during the pandemic—which obviously gives them less time to spend on their businesses, meaning that, sometimes, they take longer to scale. Women are also less likely than men to have access to investor networks, so it takes them longer to build those relationships.

The campaign is also asking for gender, race and ethnicity reporting to be introduced on the seed enterprise investment scheme, in terms of both the entrepreneurs it works with and the investors. Finally, it wants to see more support, mentoring and awareness campaigns targeting early-stage women entrepreneurs, because they know women are less likely to know about schemes such as SEIS and more likely to be up for mentoring and other similar types of support.

The “we are radikl” team hope that Ministers in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Treasury will engage with the campaign, and that BEIS’s enterprise strategy, to be published later this year, will reflect its asks. They are doing so much to address the problem, building their own network of investors, Halo, and breaking down myths and perceived bias in the investor community. The Government commissioned the Alison Rose review in 2019, which identified a £250 billion boost to the UK economy through breaking down barriers to female entrepreneurs. However, we will not get very far if 99% of venture capital is passing female-led firms by. That is something the Government must turn their attention to now.

I welcome the huge amount of work the Government have done to get women into senior positions in business, and I am delighted that we are now second in the world for female representation on boards. That has increased by 50% in the past six years—as it should. We must now focus our attention on doing more to empower our female entrepreneurs. If we are to take advantage of the record number of female-led businesses founded last year, that must be a priority for us.

I wish a happy International Women’s Day to Sarah, Claire and all the brilliant women they work with. I look forward to working with them and seeing the jobs

and innovation that their businesses will bring to the UK. I hope Ministers will agree to meet us to learn more about the experience of the female entrepreneurs in the “we are radikl” network and that those experiences can be better reflected in the Government’s approach to supporting female entrepreneurs.

3.11 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards), and I thank the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for securing the debate.

International Women’s Day is an opportunity to celebrate the achievements of women, to reflect on the progress we have made in fighting for gender equality, and to campaign for the change we still need to see in our society. I will come on to each of those points shortly, but I will begin my speech by focusing on the international part of International Women’s Day—in particular, the women around the world whose lives are being torn apart by conflict and violence.

Women in Ukraine face unimaginable hardship as they watch their home towns being attacked, as they make the heart-wrenching decision whether to leave their family and their country behind in search of safety and as they are forced to defend their country against Russian aggression. Women in Afghanistan see years of progress in educating girls being rolled back overnight, face a crisis of hunger and economic collapse and remain separated from their families as they too try to reach safety.

We know that war has a devastating impact on the lives of women. It increases incidents of gender-based violence and the appalling use of sexual violence. It disrupts essential services such as health and education that so many women and girls rely on, and it leads to the displacement of millions of people.

I hope the Government can commit to specific and practical support to women in Ukraine and Afghanistan. For example, there are often shortages of sanitary and period products as conflicts unfold, so could the Minister ensure that they form part of the UK’s aid to Ukraine? In Afghanistan, there is still a need for the Government to do more to help the women left behind, for example by supporting efforts to restart girls’ education in the country. I also urge the Government to do more to support women in Afghanistan who want to rejoin their families in this country, including many of my constituents.

Turning to some issues closer to home, I raise once again the proposal for Valerie’s law, which would introduce mandatory cultural competency training for the police and other agencies dealing with black victims of domestic violence. According to the domestic violence charity Sistah Space, 86% of women of African or Caribbean heritage in the UK have either been a victim of domestic abuse or know a family member who has been assaulted. Yet despite this alarming number, the police still too often ignore the nuances that complicate black survivors’ experience with trying to get support. For example, some black women are told by the police that they cannot see any bruises, leading them to dismiss dangerous and life-threatening situations. Bruises are not always as visible on black women’s skin as on women with lighter complexions.

[Abena Oppong-Asare]

The UK's largest single provider of domestic abuse services, Refuge, recently published data showing that black women were 14% less likely to be referred by police to use its services than white survivors. Valerie's law is named after Valerie Forde, who, along with her baby daughter, was murdered by Valerie's ex-partner in 2014 despite reporting threats that were overlooked by the police. I am working with Sistah Space to help to campaign for this important change, and I am looking forward to an upcoming petitions debate on the issue.

Secondly, I am proud to chair the Labour Women's Network, which supports women standing for election and advocates for greater representation within our party and beyond. Over the last year, we have been leading a campaign, Keep the Good Stuff, which recognises that some of the innovations during the pandemic have been beneficial to women in balancing their work and family lives. I firmly believe that employers, political parties and indeed the Government must look closely at how flexible working and other pandemic-related measures can continue in the years to come. Another part of LWN's work is training women to stand for public office—for example, through the Jo Cox Women in Leadership scheme. Sadly, we now have to dedicate half our programme to resilience and self-care given the levels of online abuse that women standing for office can expect to face. Women from black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds, members of our LGBT+ community and disabled people experience more online abuse than other people. We must see more action from both the Government and the social media platforms on this issue. We will be watching closely to ensure that the online safety Bill lives up to the promises on this issue.

I end my speech on a positive note by recognising some of the inspirational women whose work and activism in my constituency too often goes unnoticed. They are women such as Charlotte Blades and Gwen Fayemi, who help to run Bexley food bank; Jattinder Rai, CEO of Bexley Voluntary Service Council; Ruth Russell, volunteer chair of Greenwich and Bexley Community Hospice; Sarah Batten, co-director of The Exchange Erith; and Kavita Trevena, who runs a support network and community investment organisation for women suffering from post-natal depression. I also thank the female councillors in my constituency for all their hard work, and send my best wishes to the excellent female local candidates standing in the local elections in May. Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the brilliant women in my office without whom I could not do my job: Abby, Yinka, Grace, and Alice.

3.18 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): It is a great pleasure to join in this debate. Like other Members, my thoughts this afternoon are with the women of Ukraine. I particularly thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) for her speech, which frankly had me filling up, so I am glad I have had some time to deal with my emotions.

Thinking of war situations where women are leaving or seeing their sons, husbands and fathers being involved in fighting, 30 years ago last week the independent state of Bosnia was founded, having itself been subjected to significant wars. I am reminded of my regular visits to Srebrenica and the memorial at Potočari, which is lovingly

maintained by bereaved women who lost their sons, fathers, brothers and uncles. We all know the story of what happened with the genocides in Bosnia. Many of those women do not have a body, or even a body part, but they are dealing with their grief by maintaining the memorials to other victims as well as their own. At this time, there will inevitably be bereaved women who have left their husbands and sons behind and do not know what their ultimate fate is going to be. For me as a Member of Parliament in this fantastic first-world country of Great Britain, I feel hopelessly inadequate watching these events unfold. We must do everything we can to support all those victims, and particularly to give safe havens to those refugees who are fleeing.

I would like to reflect on some of the other contributions made today, particularly that of the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson). I say to the Government that as the right hon. Lady has shown, we are making lots of noise about women's health and breaking lots of taboos in that space, but fundamentally, the biggest source of our oppression is our biology—our reproductive biology. The ability of women to control their fertility and manage their reproductive rights in a safe way depends on adequate contraception services, and also on a safe abortion law. I will repeat what I have said many times in this place: the abortion law is more than 50 years old. It was written before we had medical abortion, when abortion was a surgical procedure and was much more dangerous for that reason. If we are really going to look at women's reproductive rights from the perspective of safety, may I helpfully suggest that we need a review that does not rely on individual Members of Parliament tackling this as a matter of conscience? This is about how we deliver a safe environment for women to be able to manage their reproductive rights and their fertility. Until we properly bring that law up to date and into the 21st century, any semblance of a positive women's health strategy is for the birds. I leave that as a challenge for the Government.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on bravely stepping into the debate about sex and gender, and the conflict of rights that arises from conflating the two—a conflict of rights that has not been adequately tackled by either of the Front-Bench teams in this place. Frankly, that is a disgrace; it is not fair to transgender people or to women, and it is high time that we did so. I am glad that my hon. Friend has done it, and the fact that he is a man doing it on International Women's Day is a matter not for criticism, but for celebration. I am also pleased to see my hon. Friends the Members for Devizes (Danny Kruger) and for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) present, because on the last two occasions I attended this debate, there were no men. This is a way forward, because we need men to value and celebrate women too; this should not be a women-only party.

Danny Kruger: The Father of the House is also present.

Jackie Doyle-Price: My apologies—how could I forget my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley)?

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I had planned to listen rather than speak, but can I say two things to my hon. Friend? The first is to ask whether in

winding up this debate, the Minister can say what harm was done by, and what benefits there were from, early, easy and safe contraception by telephone. There is a responsibility on Government to give that information in the open so that we can challenge it if necessary, or agree with it if they say it was safe, easy and convenient—that it had benefits.

Secondly, on the issue of sex and gender, I agree with my hon. Friend that people need to speak much more openly, and that those who call people like Professor Kathleen Stock a dangerous extremist for her book “Material Girls” clearly have not read it. She, Jo Phoenix and others have written very plainly and sympathetically about trans people, but have also written determinedly that sex matters, and that women should be safe and feel protected.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank my hon. Friend for those comments. The fact remains that women are entitled to single-sex spaces for their own sake; this should not just be about risk assessment and danger. We should be able to make choices about when we want to enter spaces without men present, and that should be as important as any potential risk that any man might pose.

I will focus the substance of my comments this afternoon on the criminal justice system, though, as we are talking about breaking the bias. I do so in my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on women in the penal system. Without reiterating points made by my hon. Friends, this comes back to the point that men and women are different, and our laws and—in particular—our criminal justice system need to reflect that.

We have had a real move towards gender neutrality in how we approach public service delivery and how we produce law, but standing here in a debate to commemorate International Women's Day, I tend to view gender neutrality as just another way of centring men, because it is making us all the same, and nowhere is that more obvious than in the criminal justice system. We have a penal system built on prisons and based on the principle that we incarcerate violent, dangerous men, and that has been the approach to women. We have seen study after study that has shown that prison is not the best place for women offenders, because more often than not, women offenders are more vulnerable than their male counterparts.

Call me a pink-hearted liberal, but I tend to view our prison population as being full of people who have been failed by the state, and that is a matter of shame for me. It is particularly the case when it comes to women. We know that there are high rates of illiteracy and innumeracy among our prisoners, so how are they going to get on in life? We know that there are a huge number of people who have been through the care system and then been left on the scrapheap. In the case of women, we know that many of them are victims of sexual abuse, and in that context, prison is not the best place for them, and study after study has shown that.

Every time we make progress in this area and we start to say, “This is an opportunity for a first intervention to support women and address that vulnerability”, we then seem to go backwards. I highlight the fact that this Government have a female offenders strategy but equally are investing in 500 more prison places for women, and we need to properly join the dots and use the opportunities to make interventions to support women and break the

cycle of offending. We all know that once someone has been incarcerated, the chance that they then embark on a lifetime of reoffending and re-entering prison is very high. That is not good for them, but nor is it good for society or the taxpayer. We need to get this right.

We know also that many women do not belong in prison in the first place. One issue I have been taking up with the Ministry of Justice is the extent to which women are remanded in prison for their own protection. We have a mental health policy that has been removing police cells and prisons as places of safety—recognising that they are not good environments for people who are mentally unwell—but we are still remanding women in prison for their own safety. I thought it would be only a small number of women, probably no more than a dozen a year. Having raised the issue with the Government, I could not get any data on it. However, Her Majesty's inspectorate of prisons visited three prisons last year and in total found 68 women who had been remanded in prison for their own protection. They were not people who had committed an offence, and it was not a punishment. It is totally inappropriate for a country such as this to be remanding women in prison for that purpose, and that was in just three prisons. Across the whole system, we know that women being remanded for their own protection are a significant proportion of the prison establishment, and frankly that is not good enough. I am ashamed of it, and I call on the Government to do better.

My criticism is not with the Ministry of Justice. One of the issues is that the Ministry of Justice is sweeping up the failings of other organisations within the public sector. It is sweeping up the ability of local authorities to offer safe spaces for women to be sent to when they are at risk. Mental health services are sweeping up that failure by the Department of Health and Social Care, and I encourage the Ministry of Justice to be rather more robust in its dealings with other Departments and say, “You know what? These are not our problems, they are yours.” We should not be dealing with vulnerable people within our estate.

The other side of the criminal justice system where women are particularly negatively impacted is as victims, and we have had a number of debates in recent weeks about the poor prosecution rates for sexual violence crimes and rape in particular. Having spoken to victims, I understand that one of the reasons for that is that they are treated as a piece of evidence in that prosecution. If someone has gone through trauma, constantly reliving that in a dehumanising way is not the best way to ensure that we bring people to punishment. We really have to look at that.

There has been a lot of investment in services, but we have still not got it right. My biggest challenge on that point is that the likelihood of a victim getting justice depends on who they are. Victim-blaming, which we heard reference to earlier in the debate, is at the heart of that. Over and over again, assumptions are made about victims that impede their ability to get justice. White working-class girls in northern towns and cities were victims of abuse for many years before public authorities would pay proper attention to it, because they were not prepared to make that challenge.

I also highlight what we loosely describe as “honour killings”. What kind of a phrase is that to describe people being murdered? They are murdered by their

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

families, who should love them and keep them safe, and we call that an honour killing—"honour", which is a positive word, and "killing" for murder. That very phrase is an illustration of the discrimination against those victims; I am getting emotional just thinking about it.

In the context of the list that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) read out, we do not have to do much of a study to realise the socio-economic background of most of those victims. The only ones that we ever read about in the papers—the ones who the media get excited about—are nice white middle-class people with professional backgrounds. People who engage in prostitution disappear every week and do not get a column inch, but they are victims. They are women who are victims of male violence against women and girls.

Let us not pussyfoot around it: this is a gendered crime. My hon. Friends who are present—my hon. Friends the Members for Boston and Skegness, for Devizes, for Harwich and North Essex, for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) and for Worthing West—will not take offence when I point out that those crimes are committed by men, which is exactly what we need to face up to. We will not tackle that issue unless we tackle it as a society, which means men stepping up too.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an extraordinarily impassioned speech. She is absolutely right to make the point that men are 99% of the problem, but we can be 50% of the solution.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I welcome that comment from my hon. Friend and I am not surprised to hear it from him. I would go further than that, however: we will not fix the problem until men become part of the solution. I am afraid that the Government need to stop pussyfooting around by talking about violence against women and girls and call it what it is—male violence against women and girls.

3.32 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a genuine pleasure to follow my friend on the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price). As a former Health Minister, her comments about the importance of Health Ministers paying heed to experts and patient safety are incredibly well made. What we are seeing now is an absolute disgrace and I know that we will get it overturned.

As I look around this Chamber, I am honoured to be surrounded by many brilliant and inspirational women. We often focus, as we have done in this debate—it is important—on the way in which women's lives could be improved, but I want to give a clear message to women, particularly young women, about how great it is to be a woman.

I love being a woman and I love being an woman MP—number 430. I worry that we are sending some bad messages to young women. Once they have navigated adolescence, which is hard for everyone, we talk about pay gaps, glass ceilings, judgment about whether they will have a child, worry about whether they can have a child, constantly having to refight the battle that, "It is my body and I control it," and the violence. Then there is the menopause, osteoporosis and the pensions gap,

and then they might find themselves in an inadequate care system that employs low-paid women to support older women facing social isolation. It is not a happy picture, is it?

There are many issues that, of course, blight women's lives in my constituency and beyond, but today I want to challenge that narrative and celebrate how great it is to be a woman. Young women going into the new workforce in the future have so much to look forward to. There are huge opportunities in the workforce of the future, with improved research on women's health issues, a longer healthy life expectancy, and a culture that is changing how we think about family roles and recognising the key care-giving role that men are starting to play.

I learned my politics, as a young woman in the 1970s and 1980s, from watching and learning from the women around me—my mother, my aunts, my grandmother—and they formed me. However, I learned that what went on in the home and the discussions women had around the table were often not actually the same as what was talked about in public. I think that is particularly true of those of us from a working class Irish population in this country. I learned that women as individuals have power, and we can influence things and do remarkable things, but I also learned as I grew up that unless we have economic and political power to change the structures in which we live, we can never be equal in that society. I have seen such a change, and I have been part of that remarkable change. Thanks to the women in the Labour party that I joined in the 1980s, we have changed structures, forced through all-women shortlists and changed the face of Parliament in 1997.

In Bristol, I am very proud to have worked for women MPs at that time—we had women MPs leading that charge—and I am really proud to work with my hon. Friends in Bristol at the moment, the Members for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) and for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). I commend the positive celebration by *Bristol Live* of 137 women from across Bristol this week. If we look just at the vaccination effort, I would like to highlight my long-time friend and colleague, Bristol's director of public health, Christina Gray. The vaccination effort was led by the head nurse, Anne Morris, and the clinical commissioning group was led by its chief executive, Julia Ross. I would also like to welcome Sarah Crew as our new police chief constable. There are more amazing women involved in community action than I can mention today, but I really want to pay tribute to those women in my constituency who are leading and inspiring in fields as diverse as tackling food poverty, the charitable sector, music and the arts.

In my lifetime, the opportunities for women have expanded exponentially, and I am so proud of all those women here and across the country—I am proud to be one of them here—who are continuing to push the boundaries so that everywhere we can lead our lives to the full, because it is really fun being a woman. I love how we form friendships, share experiences, swap tips for getting through life, trade secrets, organise, challenge, do politics and make change. I love our creativity and our variety, and I love how we always remember what we can achieve if we put our minds to it. I want to celebrate that joy.

We can achieve so much individually, but we do need structures to support women's efforts, and the Labour party has consistently taken action to ensure that we get

the structural change that women need. Labour Governments have shown what can be achieved, and Labour Governments introduced legislation on equal pay, sex discrimination, equalities, the minimum wage and maternity rights. The next Labour Government will do the same, I hope with my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds). There can be no levelling up anywhere unless women's work, inside and outside employment, is at the heart of all plans, and currently it is not—not just on pay, but on good terms and conditions. There was so much during the pandemic that we can learn about for the future that was led by women. Companies with women at the top perform better and women-led businesses contribute billions to the economy, and we will be at the heart of the next Government and the next rise in the economy.

I am the mother of three boys, who are growing into fantastic young men. I am so proud of them, and I am so conscious of how important women are as role models for everyone, not just other women. We need to ensure that conversations and education focus not only on what women can achieve, but on how important our male allies are, and that tackling many of the challenges mentioned today requires a change in the dominant culture surrounding male behaviour. Following the very sad loss recently of our colleague Jack Dromey, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) said, when she spoke about Jack, that he thought his role in life was to lift her up. I am so honoured to have my husband Rob to do the same for me, and I would not be here without him.

It is a century since the first women Labour MPs were elected. I am privileged not only to be the MP for the great constituency of Bristol South, but to be surrounded by so many others, and I pay tribute to them all. In my time here, we have had Brexit, covid and now war. My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) highlighted the other day that over 90% of the Brexit debates were dominated by men. We will not let that happen when we talk about the war, the future and the horrific things happening to women right now in Ukraine. Men do often dominate the public face of such debates, but we will not let them do so. Our message to women is, "We are here, we are staying, we are growing and we are pulling you up with us".

3.39 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): It is a privilege to speak again in the debate on International Woman's Day. It has become something of a cliché for men speaking in this debate to talk about themselves as having suddenly awakened to feminism when they become fathers of daughters, and to me that has always rather prompted a question about what sort of world those fathers thought that the mothers of their daughters lived in. None the less, it is perhaps not a wholly useless lens through which to look at some of this debate.

I sent my daughter, Eleanor, to school on World Book Day dressed as Rosie Revere, Engineer, a character from a book by the American author Andrea Beaty. It is a series called "The Questioners", which includes a character called Sofia Valdez, Future Prez. For five-year-old Eleanor, the idea of a female Prime Minister is very much already on the table, and that is an idea we can all get behind, be we fans of Margaret Thatcher, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) or

indeed the Deputy Leader of the Labour party. Perhaps the fact that I made Eleanor's dress for World Book Day myself is also a glass ceiling smashed, although it reminded me that there is no word for "seamstress" that does not imply that only women can sew. We still swim in a soup of linguistic everyday sexism, and the fact remains that engineering and other male dominated professions have a long way to go.

When I was a Minister at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, I was able to foster massive growth in the diversity of people working in AI and cyber only because we started from such incredibly low numbers. Strategies are in place. They start at school, and we cannot go fast enough. However, there is something that I would like to go slower, which is time. The vast majority of young women and girls report that they have been harassed or groped at some point. YouGov reports that more than two-thirds of women have felt unsafe walking at night, and only slightly fewer report feeling unsafe in taxis, with a tradesperson in their home, or even walking alone in the daytime. Those experiences are wholly alien to the vast majority of men, and that total disconnect is a huge part of the problem.

To put that another way, today Eleanor is five. How long have I got before she comes home to tell me that she was harassed, or worse, on the school bus? How long has she got until I worry when she has to call the plumber to a student house? How long has she got before she fears the route she takes walking home? What can we, from this privileged platform in Parliament, do in the meantime to try to address some of those fairly sickening thoughts? The answer, of course, will never be enough.

I commend the Government's approach to putting more resources into the police and—crucially—into prosecution, to tackle the worst of violence against women and girls, as well as into education and beyond, to tackle the culture that will, in due course, see more women doing supposedly male jobs, and more men doing traditionally female jobs. We must all show, rather than simply say, that it can be done, although I am sure my dressmaking skills will be left to myself. This is society's problem, not solely that of Parliament. This debate must be about equity as much as it is about equality, and providing everyone with the same opportunities to live, work and play safely means providing different people with the different tools they need to get over the same obstacles. I wholly endorse the approach of the Welsh Government to the telemedicine that was referred to earlier in the debate, and I hope that this Government will come to the same conclusion when they review that.

If I could pick just one area in which to urge the Government to go even further than they currently do, it would be tackling the multiplicity of factors that mean childcare still falls disproportionately on women—something exacerbated hugely by covid. In everything from the design of our towns and cities and the attitude of employers to the average time spent commuting, we can do so much more to give men and women equal opportunities to succeed. By tackling childcare we can perhaps unleash the productivity of half the population even further.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Liz Saville Roberts.

3.44 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Dirprwy Lywydd. Many of us like to think that history is a series of incremental improvements, but recent events show that to be naive. I am afraid that I begin with the sad observation that many of the inequalities and barriers facing women today have remained stubbornly obstinate. We should be alert to the fact that history is not a one-way route to nirvana.

The covid-19 pandemic underscored gender divisions in our society, and it has proved them to be long standing and structural. They include poverty and job insecurity, with global management firm McKinsey noting that women's jobs were nearly twice as vulnerable as those of men during the initial months of the pandemic. It also found that women made up 39% of global employment but accounted for 54% of overall job losses during the period. One explanation for the disproportionate effect on women is that covid-19 increased the burden of unpaid care, which women are expected to perform as part of the gender role assigned to them—to us—by society.

Even in the chaos of war, such gender roles endure. For example, we have seen, from afar—we are lucky, are we not—how many Ukrainian women have stepped up to care for family, friends and neighbours, as men are conscripted to fight against Putin's oppressive invasion. Of course, women also make up the majority of adult refugees from Ukraine, and many thousands of them are, to our shame, being delayed in seeking sanctuary in the UK due to the painfully slow and limited Home Office visa system.

Women have a unique perspective on war because of the expectation on them to be care givers. They hold families together as they are battered by events beyond their control. We see that in this war, and the nature of digital images being transferred to us almost instantaneously has brought home to us the sheer shock of the changes that can be wrought upon families by events completely beyond their control. We see that playing out tragically.

Closer to home, in Wales, gender equality charity Chwarae Teg has shown that inequality is often driven by the burden of caring responsibilities falling disproportionately on women. It demonstrates that such responsibilities account for 24.1% of economically inactive women in Wales, compared with 5.8% of men. That is why Plaid Cymru, in our co-operation agreement with the Welsh Government, is expanding free childcare to all two-year-olds in Wales to provide greater support for women to pursue their own careers and life goals.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) raised another area where progress is slow: political representation. In the Senedd, 43% of Members are female. The figure for Welsh MPs is lower, at 35%, and only 29% of Welsh councillors are women. Without a vibrant and diverse political culture that ensures that women are represented in all positions of power and values their contribution, how can we ever hope to end gender inequality?

Plaid Cymru plans to address that glaring democratic deficit by backing Senedd reform. I am excited about this. It would include expanding the number of Senedd Members, which we desperately need for effective government and effective scrutiny—60 Members is not enough to carry out those roles—as well as introducing

a voting system that is as proportional as possible and establishing gender quotas in law. I am excited about that. That in itself would help to break the bias.

I turn to women's safety. We have witnessed the murder of Wenjing Lin in Wales and, of course, Sarah Everard and Sabina Nessa as well as all the names tragically listed earlier. Hundreds of women have been murdered at the hands of men in recent years. That reminds us of the shockingly high levels of abuse, violence and predatory behaviour that women face in Wales and across the UK. For example, 71% of women say that they have experienced sexual harassment in public places. Such a situation cannot continue to be tolerated, and change is needed. One positive proposal is for the justice and policing system to be devolved to Wales, so that we can align the support that we have from our Parliament more effectively. Devolving justice would enable us to tackle structural inequalities such as gender-based violence. It would allow us to integrate the Welsh Government's Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 with policing, courts, prisons and other services that are currently run from Westminster.

Let us bear in mind that we still do not have a women's prison. Many of us do not want one, but we have no residential provision in Wales at present. It was last mooted three years ago that this would be changed, but we are yet to have that, and we should place education, health and housing at the heart of prevention and rehabilitation for offenders. A high proportion of women who enter prison are themselves victims of domestic abuse and sexual assault. By devolving justice, we could expand community alternatives to prison so that women in Wales are closer to their families and their children as part of their rehabilitation. We could shift the obsession with incarceration and look at supporting vulnerable women and tackling the underlying issues that lead to offending. The time to act is now.

The First Minister of Wales said this week that it is not a matter of "when"—rather, he said that it is a matter of "when" and not "if" justice is devolved; if only I could express myself more effectively when I am enthusiastic about something. I am pleased that that is now the Welsh Government's position and I would very much like a similar position to be iterated from Opposition Front Benchers here. That commitment runs alongside our co-operation agreement with Plaid Cymru.

There is far more that I could say on the topic of International Women's Day, but I believe that the points I have outlined represent some of the most pressing issues. I am proud that my party, Plaid Cymru, is calling for positive change for women and girls in Wales and the wider world.

3.51 pm

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): It has been humbling and very disquieting to listen to the accounts that we have heard of abuse, hatred and discrimination, and, of course, violence and murder. I pay particular tribute to the family of Ellie Gould and to their friends, the family of Poppy Devey Waterhouse, who have been in the Public Gallery this afternoon—Ellie was a girl from a family of Wiltshire people who was murdered very young, as was Poppy. I pay tribute to their campaign for the law to change and I look forward to the conclusion of the Wade review, which is looking into the circumstances of those murders.

I want to speak, first, about the economy in which women find themselves and, secondly, about the politics of gender. We have heard that behind every great woman is a great man, and I am proud to stand behind so many great women on the Government Benches, and opposite so many great women as well. I am the son and grandson of full-time working women, who are also mothers—very good mothers, I emphasise—and I spent 10 years working with my wife for the charity that we founded together. We worked in prisons, including in Holloway prison before it was thankfully sold off, disbanded, closed down, and I am very glad that my children have such role models in their mother, grandmother and great-grandmother.

I echo the point that the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) made about the way that opportunities have opened up for girls and young women in our time. Of course, women have all the legal rights that they need and, increasingly, equality is becoming a reality, but there is so much more to be done, as we have heard. Perhaps just as worrying is that the idea that women can have it all often just means that women must do it all—that they must continue to do all the work that they were doing before. That presents very difficult choices, not just for women. I also made the World Book Day costume for my daughter; I advise my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) just to use cardboard boxes. That is what I did; it is so much simpler than sewing something together. My daughter wanted to go as the “Boy in the Tower”, which was a very easy costume to put together—I recommend it.

My simple policy point is that we need a more balanced economy. We need work to be closer to home. We need men and women to be able to mix the work that they do for pay in the commercial economy with work that they do with their children and elderly parents and work in the community. That would be better for everyone—for children, older people, our neighbours and ourselves.

Let me move on to the difficult topic. I regret the suggestion from Opposition Members that International Women's Day is somehow not a moment in which it is appropriate to discuss what actually a woman is. I wish that this was not a controversial topic, but the fact is that it is, and surely this is a time and a place in which that topic can be discussed. I notice that the leader of the Scottish Government has today announced an official apology to the victims of the Witchcraft Act—the victims of the hunt for witches back in the early modern period in Scotland. I hope she would also extend some sympathy to the victims of today's witch hunts. Women—mostly women, but also men—are vilified, cancelled, professionally destroyed or physically threatened for their beliefs. They are people who simply believe in a biological difference between men and women. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) and the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) for their courage on this topic. I call attention to the interim report from Dr Hilary Cass, which is just out, which highlights the vertiginous increase in young teenage girls presenting as trans. I am afraid I do not believe that we have suddenly discovered a whole new population of trans people who were repressed or denied. I fear that, by telling people that they can change sex, we are further confusing a lot of very confused young people at the most confusing time of their life.

Just as great a concern is the biological males deciding in adulthood that they want access to women-only spaces. I echo the points made by my hon. Friends the Members for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) and for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price). I hope there is some value in a man saying that. I think that trans activism is a new form of misogyny. It involves the essential denial of reality. I think we need a legal definition of what a woman is. A woman is an adult female. It is a biological and immutable reality and it is time to recognise that in the law.

3.56 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger). There are many things about which we disagree, but there are some things about which we agree, and I thank him for his kind comments. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on securing this debate, and the many hon. Members who have made interesting and valuable contributions, especially my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), who is such a doughty campaigner for disability rights and the rights of disabled women in particular.

During this International Women's Day debate, it is the women of Ukraine who should be uppermost in our minds. This morning I and other female MPs—a cross-party group—met the Ukrainian ambassador's wife. She impressed on us the terrible burden that Ukrainian women face as they flee their country with their children, often leaving their male relatives behind and uncertain of their destination. The majority of the now millions of refugees fleeing Ukraine are women and children, and they need visa-free access to the United Kingdom with their children. We must match the European Union on this, no ifs and no buts. Let's get on with it.

Women are particularly vulnerable in war because of their sex. This is because women are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence at the hands of men. That violence is sex-based and directed at women because of our biology and the fact that we are weaker than men. Sex matters. I do not know why we call it gender-based violence, because it is not gender-based violence; it is sex-based violence. Gender is a social construct. Sex is a material reality. I would like to hear us talk more about sex. I would like to hear us talk about the sex-based pay gap. I would like to hear us talk about the fact that, as Professor Alice Sullivan has said so powerfully in *The Guardian* today, it is mothers and not fathers who bear the burden of parenthood. Research shows that men often get a pay premium as a result of parenthood, but women's pay goes down.

I would also like us to be able to say, as is the case in law, that lesbians like myself are same-sex attracted women, not same-gender attracted. What you cannot define you cannot protect, and what you cannot name cannot be properly discussed and debated. That is why the stealthy erasure of sex-based language from our statute book and public and private policy making should be resisted.

It is also why politicians and policy makers should be precise in their language, and should not conflate sex and gender.

Last month, one of Scotland's Supreme Courts reminded lawmakers that reference to the protected characteristic of sex in the Equality Act 2010 is a reference to a man or a woman for which purpose “a woman is a female of any age.”

[Joanna Cherry]

The court said:

“Provisions in favour of women”

based on the protected characteristic of sex

“by definition exclude those who are biologically male.”

That is the law. I am quoting from paragraph 36 of the judgment by the highest court in Scotland in the case of *For Women Scotland Limited* against the Lord Advocate and the Scottish Ministers. So I defy anyone to claim that what I have just said is transphobic. It is not; it is the law, and it is based on the Equality Act, which also protects trans people from discrimination by means of the very widely drawn protected characteristic of gender reassignment.

The Equality Act was passed by the Labour party; all credit to them for doing so. I know that the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman)—who is not in the Chamber, but for whom I have the highest regard—was instrumental in the passing of that Act. It is also hugely valued by my party, so much so that when our current First Minister was drafting the constitution for an independent Scotland in 2014, she decided to enshrine in that constitution the protections afforded to women and the other protected characteristics in the Equality Act. It was going to be part of the fundamental law of Scotland. I think it would be good if more Scottish politicians remembered that and celebrated it.

I want to quote from an excellent column in today's *Telegraph*. I am not in the habit of buying or reading the *Telegraph*, although a very dear friend of mine—who is now dead—used to say that she bought it every day so that she would have something reliable with which to disagree. However, this is a very good column by Suzanne Moore, who says:

“Words matter, because women naming ourselves and our experience matters. As the American social reformer and women's rights activist Susan B Anthony had it: ‘No self-respecting woman should wish or work for the success of a party who ignores her sex.’”

And, in my view, no self-respecting woman should wish or work for the success of a political party that makes her rights as a woman or a lesbian conditional on her acceptance of gender identity politics. My rights as a woman and a lesbian are not conditional on my accepting gender identity politics. Nevertheless, as a member of the advisory group of the organisation Sex Matters—and I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in this respect—I am aware of many cases across the United Kingdom of women being harassed and investigated at work for expressing gender-critical views.

Now, however, we can fight back. Thanks to the courage and resilience of a woman called Maya Forstater and her legal team, we have an Employment Appeal Tribunal ruling that gender-critical beliefs are protected under the Equality Act. That was a major victory for freedom of belief and freedom of speech across these islands. Professor Jo Phoenix of the Open University and postgraduate student Raquel Rosaria Sanchez of Bristol University are just two of the brave women who are taking their universities to court for failing to defend them from harassment because of their gender-critical views. Across the United Kingdom, many women, and indeed men, are now taking their employees, and membership organisations such as the Green party of

England and Wales, to court for discriminating against them on the grounds of their belief that sex is real and immutable.

I say to all the gender-critical women who are watching this debate today that we are starting to win this debate, and people like me will not give up no matter what is thrown in our road. Maya Forstater's win is not the only significant one since the last International Women's Day. I have already mentioned *For Women Scotland's* win in Scotland's Supreme Courts; *Fair Play for Women* also achieved a major court victory in a case about the meaning of “sex” in the census in England and Wales, although it was not so successful in Scotland.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: The hon. and learned Lady is making a terrific speech. Would she agree that men have to stand up for women's rights, too? There are too many men who stand back from this debate and say, “Oh well, this is a women's issue. I'm not going to get involved.” I think that is a shame, and that is why I spoke in today's debate.

Joanna Cherry: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Even worse, there are many men—young men—involved in this debate who have embraced a new form of misogyny. I know that to my cost, and I hope that that will start to change.

But I am trying to be positive, and I want to list a couple of the other successes there have been in the last year for gender-critical women such as myself. My friends at the LGB Alliance are registered as a charity now, and they held a major conference that was attended by many parliamentarians. I see some of them here today. Sadly, however, a straight, married Member of this House saw fit to protest outside the conference, which was organised by lesbians to discuss the rights of same-sex-attracted people. I thought I had seen the last of that sort of lesbophobia in the '90s, but it turns out I was wrong. I repeat that lesbian rights are not conditional on our accepting gender identity theory.

Another positive development has been the Equality and Human Rights Commission entering the debate on self-identification and on how to frame the quite appropriate ban on conversion therapy. The commission entered the debate with a voice of calm common sense, reminding us that human rights are universal and that all protected characteristics under the Equality Act deserve protection. Others have mentioned the very welcome interim report on the Cass review today, and I hope the Minister will be able to assure us that the Government will look carefully at that report and look into the alarming phenomenon of so many young women feeling so uncomfortable with their identity as women as they go through puberty in our society that they feel they have to change their identity to cope with those pressures.

Sir Peter Bottomley: Can I make two points to, and through, the hon. and learned Lady? First, Suzanne Moore ought to have been able to write her column for *The Guardian*, and I hope that *The Guardian* will report the hon. and learned Lady's speech in full tomorrow and explain why Suzanne Moore cannot publish her thoughts in her own newspaper, as it once was. Secondly, on the LGB Alliance conference, which I attended, I went up to some of the people protesting outside and asked if they had read the book “Trans” or the book “Material Girls”. They said no. I invited them to join

me in asking Liam Hackett, the chief executive of the anti-bullying charity Ditch the Label, if he would withdraw his words describing Kathleen Stock as a dangerous extremist for giving her plain views on women's rights.

Joanna Cherry: I agree with what the hon. Gentleman says, and I am proud to call Professor Kathleen Stock a friend. She is an admirable scholar, a feminist and a lesbian who has written carefully about these issues, and the way she has been traduced by students at her university and, sadly, by some politicians in one of my favourite cities, Brighton, is absolutely disgraceful. I want to be positive today, however, and I think that on this issue the tide is turning. I am living proof that cancellation does not always work.

Just before I sit down, I have a couple of questions for the Minister. Will she back the Equality and Human Rights Commission to produce solid guidance on the definitions of protected characteristics and single-sex services? A lot of the harassment I have described stems from women setting out the case for single-sex services and then facing wrongful accusations of transphobia. Secondly, will she push for Government Departments to end the use of external human resource benchmarking schemes for legal compliance with the Equality Act? As we saw in the Akua Reindorf report from Essex University, some external benchmarks—sadly, some from Stonewall, of which I used to be, but no longer am, a supporter—have been wrong in law. Finally, once the EHRC has published some decent guidance, will she review civil service HR policies to ensure that they are in line with the law of the land under the Equality Act, rather than in line with prejudiced lobbying groups?

4.9 pm

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), and I salute her courage in talking about these issues. They are not always easy, but they must be discussed.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on securing this important debate. Many important topics have been discussed today, not least early access to telemedicine for early-stage abortion, which merits much further discussion in this House, but I will concentrate on a topic that my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) so movingly covered: women and girls in Ukraine.

Images from war are often characterised by tanks, physical destruction and the loss of life in combat, but conflict is as much about those on the sidelines as about those on the frontline. We know from history that, in war, rape is routinely used as a weapon—a barbaric weapon. It causes incomprehensible damage to victims, it subjugates women through fear and stigma, and children born as a result of these violent acts often struggle with issues of identity.

Sexual violence in conflict has rightly been recognised as a war crime by the International Criminal Court. Such violence has been a stain on our history, and I am appalled that we are already hearing reports of history repeating itself in Ukraine. Speaking at an online event hosted by Chatham House, the Ukrainian Foreign Minister reportedly shared details of how Russian soldiers are raping Ukrainian women in the occupied territories.

Julie Bindel, the investigative journalist, has reported that well-known porn sites have had new videos uploaded by Russian soldiers documenting disgustingly brutal crimes. We cannot let these atrocities go unpunished.

Under the leadership of this Government, and following an initiative spearheaded by the noble Lord Hague, there has been a great deal of progress to end sexual violence in conflict. The integrated review set out clearly the mission to “strengthen justice for survivors”, the G7 communiqué set out plans to prevent and end sexual violence against women and girls in conflict, and last year the UK, alongside its allies, issued a strong statement that the use of sexual violence as a weapon in conflict is a red line akin to the use of chemical weapons. The Prime Minister has spoken strongly in this place to say that sexual violence in conflict will not be tolerated and that those who are found to have committed it will be punished.

The challenge for all of us in this place is that, to achieve this, survivors in Ukraine must come forward and we must have a co-ordinated international approach to collect the evidence. We all know that we have challenges domestically in encouraging women to come forward to be heard, but imagine the fear of coming forward for a woman who has not only been abused but whose country has been invaded—by Russia, which effectively decriminalised domestic violence in 2017.

We must now send a clear message to the women of Ukraine that they will be supported. Our actions must be stronger than just words: we must collate the evidence; we must engage with the International Criminal Court; and we must prosecute. None of us can allow this to pass us by. We all have a responsibility. On this International Women's Day we must say that sexual violence in conflict is not inevitable, and we must never allow it to be inevitable.

4.12 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to participate in this debate and to celebrate the trailblazers who made it possible for so many women to come through these doors and sit on these Benches: the women who fought, protested, sacrificed and put their lives on the line in their effort to secure gender equality and to grant women the right to go to school, to work, to vote, to open a bank account in our own name, which is such a simple thing, and so many other rights that we could not bear to live without. I argue those women would want us not just to celebrate but to continue agitating, because there is still a long way to go and more to be done if we are to get to a state where women can truly be considered equal to men.

This year, as on every International Women's Day, organisations have taken to social media to share their commitment to gender equality and to breaking the bias, which is this year's theme. In response, the “Gender Pay Gap Bot” Twitter account tweeted the pay gap of those organisations. Some organisations could hold their head high, such as Contact Company, Abbeycroft Leisure, St John Ambulance and a few others, but unfortunately these organisations were in the minority.

In 2022, we still live in a society in which 83% of the UK's most popular jobs have a gender pay gap. Recent Labour party analysis shows that, at the current rate of progression, the gender pay gap will not close until 2059. We need urgent action to change the system and address pay inequality, which is not just plain wrong but leaves so many women vulnerable to abuse.

[Bell Ribeiro-Addy]

The representation of women in senior positions, right across society, is still woefully low. I am proud to be part of a parliamentary Labour party that is 51% women. I will not pretend that that happened overnight, but when the time came, we did not wait for attitudes to change and we did not rest on platitudes. We took action to increase representation, and the result is someone like myself, who is the product of an all-women shortlist. This is a parliamentary party that reflects society not only in its make-up, but in the quality of debate and in the policies that are put forward.

So to all those in organisations across the country who are wringing their hands and saying, “Oh, it’s so hard. What do we do on women’s equality?”, I say, “You are just making excuses”. Change does not come just because time goes on; it is something that people have to make happen. Because of the work of women in this House and across society, enforcing equality has never been easier, as we have best practice, policy and legislation—all these different things—at our disposal.

In 2022 the under-representation of women in senior roles and a gender pay gap is a choice. So I will not applaud all the colourful social media bits that have been put up by different organisations, and the events and seminars for women that have gone by in past days. I will not applaud those organisations for saying that they are trying, because they are just failing. The ones that continue to preside over these situations have made a choice. Their choice has been to discriminate against women every single day, and they should be thoroughly ashamed of themselves.

It is right that we have discussed domestic gender inequality, as that is obviously extremely important, but we must remember that we are celebrating International Women’s Day, which is a day for all women, wherever they are in the world. Our minds rightfully turn to the plight of women in Ukraine who are facing Putin’s aggression: those women we all saw this morning in the maternity hospital; those left behind in the country, as so many women often are in this situation; and those who have fled and are currently being denied asylum by countries such as ours, alongside refugees from other countries who are also fleeing war and persecution. My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) was right to say that no one could claim to support standing up for all women if we allow a heinous piece of legislation such as the Nationality and Borders Bill to go ahead, which will only worsen the situation for some of the most vulnerable women in the world.

Finally, I worry about a movement for women’s equality and a feminism that does not represent all women, of all classes, nationalities and races. I was sad to hear black women speak of being feminists but not being able to call themselves such because they do not believe that movements for women’s equality typically represent their experiences as black women. When the majority of women in the world are of colour, a women’s movement that does not recognise the impact that racism plays, and the fundamental role it has in increasing inequality among women, is not truly a movement that represents all women, and it is not worth what it says it is worth. That is not acceptable. The idea that we should fight for women’s equality but make concessions for a certain

group of women first, and then later we can get to this other group of women, has been the bane of the women’s equality movement, and that absolutely has to change. We have to demand equality for all women and we have to do it right now.

In this country at the moment the equality we seek for women does not have to be so hard. In 2022, if your organisation continues to preside over under-representation and a gender pay gap, it is simply just trash. If you are not actively a part of the solution to end gender inequality, you are simply just another part of the problem.

4.18 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I want to echo the opening remarks of the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). She is absolutely right: today we stand in solidarity with the women of Ukraine. Our hearts go out to them in their suffering, and we stand in awe of their bravery and resilience. Women are all too often the most vulnerable, and they are the real victims of war and conflict. The hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) has just made a passionate speech about that. Globally, an estimated 736 million women have experienced sexual violence—that is one in three of us. More than 80,000 women were murdered in 2020, most at the hands of a close relation. Violence extends to children, too; 60 million girls are being sexually assaulted on their way to school every year. Those are not just numbers—they are human beings who feel pain and fear, and are being traumatised throughout their lives.

UN Women notes that violence disproportionately affects low-income countries, but our country is no beacon when it comes to women’s safety. Last week was the very sad first anniversary of Sarah Everard’s horrific murder by a Metropolitan police officer. The police response to the Clapham Common vigil was violent, too. Today, we are still waiting to hear of serious steps to stamp out misogyny in the Met once and for all, but it is not just about police forces. Misogyny is deeply ingrained in our culture, being present everywhere from schools to nightclubs to the courts.

Drink spiking has received a lot of public attention recently. It is a particularly vile form of violence against women and girls. One third of women have been spiked or know someone who has been.

The Government’s end-to-end rape review laid bare the failures of the criminal justice system. Last year, less than 2% of rape cases ended in conviction, adding insult to injury for survivors who find the strength to come forward and report rape—which only one in six women actually do, because they mistrust the system. No wonder they do.

What has been done in the past year to break the bias and to ensure that nobody is disadvantaged by their gender? Well, not enough. While racism and homophobia are considered hate crimes, misogyny is not, despite nearly every woman having experienced gender-based harassment. We have discussed it in the House, but I am still convinced that misogyny must become a hate crime. Although such a measure would not be a silver bullet, there are many reasons why it would mean progress: it would allow for the more accurate collection of data on harassment and make the collection of such data mandatory; it would set a precedent that such behaviour is unacceptable; it would curb the street harassment that 68% of all women experience on a near daily basis;

and it would stamp out low-level behaviour based on misogyny so that it would not lead to much more serious offences based on misogyny.

Misogyny needs to be tackled in all settings. I have previously talked about the provision of age-appropriate education on consent in schools. The delivery of age-appropriate relationship education by experts in every school would be a very good start. It cannot be left to a postcode lottery. Some schools do it very well but, as I have said before, it cannot be for maths or language teachers to do such important work. It has to be delivered by experts.

As the crisis in Ukraine continues to unfold, many women will become displaced and especially vulnerable. We cannot allow refugees from Ukraine or elsewhere to fall into the arms of traffickers or abusers.

Finally, the Government must listen to and champion women's voices. They are the agents of change. We women have made progress—often painful and slow—and we still have a long way to go, but I wish to echo the words of the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) in saying that it is fun to be a woman. It is important to be here. To everybody who listens to today's debate I say: come forward. We need you.

4.23 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a privilege to close the debate for my party. It has been a pleasure to listen to many eloquent and important speeches from Members of all parties. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for securing this debate.

I found it difficult to know what I wanted to say this year. I felt there was so much that I might want to cover, particularly given the situation in Ukraine—I will try to touch on some of that—but I also felt a bit deflated, if I am honest, because in other ways I could easily have given the same speech today as I gave last year.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I should say to the hon. Lady that although I indicated to her that she did not have long to speak, people have fortunately been quite brief, so she has a little longer than I indicated.

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful for that, Madam Deputy Speaker. We will see how we get on.

It does sometimes feel a wee bit like groundhog day in these debates, because women still have to strain every sinew and despite that, not so much changes. But there are bright spots, as the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) put it well, and I want to acknowledge and celebrate them as well.

Nobody here will be anything other than deeply concerned about the women and girls in Ukraine as they walk away from what were their perfectly normal lives in this unimaginably terrible situation, leaving everything that they have known behind them—and, as an aside, for goodness' sake let us waive the visas and let these women in. All of us will have seen the footage of the women who had gone into hospital to give birth, but instead were being carried out, heavily pregnant and injured, on stretchers. They were under fire at the very time in their lives when they were at their most vulnerable. It is almost too much to comprehend. We will probably,

and hopefully, never know what it is to walk in those women's shoes, but we absolutely stand with them in the face of this wickedness.

There are so many shocking tales from Ukraine, no doubt familiar to women and girls in war zones across the world, as the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Opong-Asare) set out so clearly. I also saw footage of a whole bunch of pushchairs and prams parked up outside a railway station in Poland by mums who must have known that the mums who were fleeing Ukraine with their wee ones would need them. I thought that that was amazing and it was a chink of light in the darkness there.

I know that the theme of this year's International Women's Day is "breaking the bias", which is a welcome focus. At home and further afield, the lens through which everything is seen, including the decisions that affect our lives across the world, is still a male one. That applies whether we look at work, at health—we have talked about the recovery from covid—or at politics. Too often that bias, those barriers, or that ingrained misogyny remain.

I was very pleased to see Baroness Helena Kennedy's report on misogyny and criminal justice in Scotland. It is a welcome step forward. As the report highlights, not all men are misogynists, but all women experience misogyny. I am heartened, too, by the continued laser focus on this by our First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, and her gender-balanced Cabinet. The Scottish Parliament continues to become more diverse, slowly but surely changing—to be honest it has been far too slow—to reflect the Scotland that we know, and we are the better for that, because we need our representation to reflect all of us. Making sure that we actively support marginalised communities in all of that is important.

Regardless of that, politics might not always be a comfortable space to inhabit. I take the point of the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) that we should enjoy it as much as we can, but there is often a nasty undercurrent—online in particular—which is wearing. None the less, we do need women in politics. A woman's place is in politics. A woman's place is in decision making. We can see that, where that is true, there are better ways to do things. In Scotland, for instance, we have seen world-leading legislation to provide free period products; legislation developed directly with women's organisations that acknowledges domestic abuse as much more than just physical violence; and a determination to incorporate into Scots law the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

We also have a fantastic women's health plan in Scotland, which is so important. The focus on the menopause, which, for far too long, has not been spoken about, is profoundly helpful. I have been very pleased to hear a number of hon. Members mention the menopause today.

I really welcome that focus on women's health. I am a woman with polycystic ovary syndrome, and I am not alone in that: 10% of women worldwide experience either PCOS or endometriosis, yet less than 3% of UK research funding goes into researching women-specific conditions—that is women-specific conditions as a whole, not the condition that I am referring to. PCOS is little understood. Basically, there is a black hole where research should be. If Members want to know how it might impact on the menopause or on becoming an older woman, they can forget it. The information does not exist, but I have no doubt that, if that condition affected

[Kirsten Oswald]

men, the research would have been done. Moreover, if men experienced the levels of sexual violence that women do, we would not have seen the disgraceful pantomime of Raith Rovers and Clyde football clubs transferring, retransferring, and then trying to untransfer a man who had been ruled in a civil case to be a rapist. I must say that I felt that Raith Rovers' International Women's Day tweet, waxing lyrical about forging women's equality together, was somewhat bold, or just extremely offensive, given the circumstances.

I have seen some people—men, actually—ask why that had never seemed to be a problem before. “Why now?”, they ask, suggesting, and some actually saying, that those of us who are unhappy about it are jumping on a bandwagon. I will tell them why: we are ground down by this kind of thing day in, day out, and thank goodness we have made enough progress over the past few years that women feel able to say “Enough.”

I take my hat off to the incredibly brave woman who found herself at the heart of that situation, and these strong, principled female players, coaches and teams who were not willing to stand for it any longer. To the men who stood up with them, I say thank you. We all need to stand up if we want to break that bias at every level, but it is not easy, and that sorry episode should never have happened.

I will close by reflecting on the difference that individual women make, going about their lives but improving the lives of others as they do so. We all know those women. They are all around us—our families, our friends—and they are absolutely worth celebrating in this debate. They are women such as my three East Renfrewshire councillor colleagues Angela Convery, Annette Ireland and Caroline Bamforth, who work tirelessly day in, day out to improve the lives of others. They are women such as the three young East Renfrewshire women named in the YWCA Scotland “30 under 30” list, Marissa Roxburgh, Elise Kelly and Kira Hendry. They are women such as Rena McGuire, Ashley McIlvenney, Annmarie Strain and Oonagh McKinnon, who work tirelessly to deliver transformational change in our community—I am sure hon. Members will wish them all well; they are up against one another for a community award, but they probably all deserve to win.

I could go on adding the names of amazing women in my community; I could stand here all day and do that, and I am confident that all hon. Members here could do the same for their constituencies. There are also women such as Carolyn, Nix, Tracey, Katie and Freya, who support me as I support constituents. These women, and women the world over going about their business, stepping up, stepping forward, making things better for others and for those coming after them—they are the women who inspire me daily. Let us all try to be more like these women. Let us always stretch a hand out to others as we continue to push forward, and maybe then we will see real and sustained equality.

4.32 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is such a pleasure to speak in this debate as we mark International Women's Day. I thank the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for proposing the debate and the Backbench Business Committee for securing it.

Has it not been wonderful to hear so many examples of incredible women this afternoon in fields from science to business, health, education, the arts, politics, trade unions and more? Has it not also been important to celebrate, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) rightly said, how wonderful it is to be a woman?

As we celebrate those examples, however, that celebration is tempered, as was mentioned earlier, by the realisation of the dreadful situation so many other women are in. The International Development Committee statement before this debate drew attention to the appalling circumstances of so many women and girls in Afghanistan, which was rightly underlined by my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) in her remarks. Many speakers have also expressed sympathy for and solidarity with the women and girls of Ukraine.

As so many have said, it is hard for us here to imagine the horror and anguish those women and girls have faced over the past few weeks, whether they are still in Ukraine under Russian bombardment or have fled for safety, leaving brothers, fathers, partners and sons behind. Many have referred to what took place yesterday, with the Russian army bombing a maternity hospital in Mariupol—almost too appalling to contemplate. For many of us, it is also horrendous to contemplate the circumstances for those women now having to give birth in bomb shelters in those areas under attack. Putin's invasion is an attack on sovereignty, democracy, freedom, the rule of law, and women. Yesterday, Ukraine's First Lady, Olena Zelenska, offered her testimony from Ukraine. In it she named some of the child casualties of the war such as Alice, Polina and Arseniy. In their name, we fully support—I am sure I speak for the whole House—providing the people of Ukraine with all possible political, economic and practical support to repel Putin's forces.

This afternoon we have heard another awful list of names—that read out by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips). Her testimony, delivered every year in this debate, highlights the shocking scale of the epidemic of violence against women in this country, without losing sight of the individual tragedy that lies behind every statistic. As she said, the perpetrators killed, but we in power can and must do better. My colleagues here and in the other place have time and again brought pressure to bear, not least during the passage of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. We argued for the inclusion of domestic abuse and sexual offences in the definition of “serious violence”; for violence against women and girls to be a strategic policing requirement, giving it the same prominence as terrorism and organised crime; for safeguards on the extraction of data from victims' phones; for a lifting of the limit on the prosecution of common assault or battery in domestic abuse cases; and for a review, finally, into spiking so that we can get to the bottom of this appalling practice. None of those measures was included in the original Bill; they were all the result of campaigning with powerful women's organisations beyond this House, and they were all achieved, I am sorry to say, in the teeth of Government opposition. Outside that specific legislation, it was also pressure from those organisation and from the Opposition that resulted in violence against women and girls becoming a strategic policing requirement, giving it the same prominence as terrorism and organised crime.

But there is so much more to do. As my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) said, we need drastic action that recognises that this is an emergency. Will the Government now introduce the other measures contained in Labour's comprehensive Green Paper? Will they ensure that there will be a specialist rape unit in every police force area? Will they bring in minimum sentences for rape and for stalking? Will they make misogyny a hate crime, as has rightly been called for? Will they publish a perpetrators strategy, as the Domestic Abuse Bill requires this to happen before the end of next month?

Violence against women and girls—male violence, as was rightly said—is not just a criminal justice issue; it is also a public health one. More than 60% of women accessing mental health services have experienced domestic abuse—an appalling statistic at the heart of the Women's Aid campaign, #DeserveToBeHeard, rightly promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum). That is one of many reasons why we have committed to guarantee mental health treatment within a month for all who need it and enable 1 million more people to access treatment.

We had high hopes that the Government would be similarly ambitious when, this time last year, they announced that we would have a new women's health strategy by the end of 2021. Well, it is now March 2022 and we are still waiting. In fact, we are waiting longer and longer—for cervical screening appointments, for breast cancer appointments, and for routine gynaecological treatment. We are seeing services cut, or in line to be cut, such as the access to telemedicine for early abortion that has rightly been referred to by so many Members today, and we are seeing areas of extreme need, such as PCOS—polycystic ovary syndrome—and endometriosis, still not being dealt with properly.

Life expectancy and outcomes for many women are actually worsening. As my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) has repeatedly emphasised, black women are now 40% more likely than white women to experience miscarriage and four times more likely to die while pregnant, yet we still lack any hard targets for improvement. Waiting lists were already at record highs even before covid-19 hit, but we can do something about it: previous Labour Governments reduced waiting times from 18 months to 18 weeks. We have to learn from that change, act on it, and secure the future of our NHS, providing the staff, equipment and modern technology it needs to treat women on time.

As so many have said, we also need change for women in our economy, now more than ever. My party introduced the Equal Pay Act 1970, the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and the Equality Act 2010, rightly referred to by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) as a Labour achievement. Those advances were often delivered hand in hand with the trade union movement. We understand that our society, our economy and our country are poorer if women cannot play their part. Women hold the key to a stronger economy. Women-led small and medium-sized enterprises contribute about £85 billion to economic output, and companies in which women are more prominent are ultimately more successful, yet women are still less likely to be able to access as much finance as men when they try to set up companies, and only eight of the FTSE 100's chief executive officers are women.

Backing women in business is not just the right thing to do, but makes hard-headed economic sense, yet we are still dragging our feet. We cannot do so any longer. That is why we have committed to 100,000 new businesses, many of them run by women, in the first term of a Labour Government. It is also why we would act to boost family-friendly employment rights. Last year, the gender pay gap actually increased—one of the few statistics that has not been mentioned in this debate—but that followed a decade of slower reductions than under the Labour Government, as referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy).

As my hon. Friends the Members for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) and for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) said, much of this precarity for women has been accelerated during the pandemic. We need gender pay comparisons across companies as well as ethnicity pay reporting in order to tackle compound inequalities. We need to tackle workplace harassment, including third-party harassment. We need to implement the International Labour Organisation's convention against workplace harassment, and we need to ensure that flexibility is in the hands of women workers, not just their employers, as is currently so often the case. We must recognise childcare as the fundamental economic infrastructure that it is, not the afterthought it so often seems to be for too many women and families in our country. Finally, we need to measure the impact of policies on women, as the Government legally should do.

International Women's Day is always a bittersweet moment—a chance to celebrate how far we have come, to note with regret how far we still have to go, and to recommit ourselves to the struggle for women and girls today and for our daughters and granddaughters tomorrow. My party now has as many women MPs as the proportion of women in the country, aiding us in this struggle, but there is still so much more to do—particularly in local government, as the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) said. It is also critical that we prevent the abuse of women on social media. The hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) spoke powerfully about the impact of this abuse on women politicians, and I commend her on her honesty. To reflect on some of the discussion that took place previously, it always makes sense to check what a woman has actually said, rather than what a man suggests she has said on social media.

Women across our country deserve security, prosperity and respect. That is what a Labour Government will seek to ensure, and as long as we are on these Benches, it is what we will deliver as we seek to break the bias.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Trudy Harrison.

4.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): I start by commending, as others have, the work that Mr Speaker has undertaken in this House to protect women, to encourage more women parliamentarians and to support all parliamentarians, but I know that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, provide that advice to us most nights in the Tea Room and throughout the House. It is certainly appreciated by me, and everybody in this House.

[Trudy Harrison]

I start with my number. I have heard many numbers today, and I am proudly No. 456. I begin by thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), who has brought this debate to the House. I know that she has worked tirelessly as a parliamentarian in this place in the interests of women, and I am so pleased to be able to support such staunch advocates of gender equality in this year's International Women's Day debate.

I will start by briefly running through some—hopefully all—of the speeches in brief to reflect on those comments. My right hon. Friend started with the need to encourage more parliamentarians, which is critical, to represent society. That is a particularly important thing for me, as a mum of four daughters who I talk about so often. I am afraid to say that none of my daughters want to go into politics, and at a recent event I spoke at, I asked all the women to put their hands if they had daughters. I then asked whether any of those daughters would consider a career in politics. I am sad to say that none of those hands stayed up, so we have much work to do.

The hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) referred to the Godiva Trust celebrating lives, and she talked about her mum and two sisters. So many of us talk about the support systems, who are often men. I was delighted to hear about the dress-making and costume creations that have been going on in the House.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) spoke so powerfully, as ever. I thank her for the work she does on the Select Committee. It may have been her son, but she referred to the 12-year-old Hugo. *[Interruption.]* Okay, he is not her son. He was questioning how she would celebrate International Women's Day, and she spoke about female entrepreneurs. It is important that we never take for granted our freedoms and conveniences, as she spoke about so powerfully.

I am grateful to have this chance to speak about some of the issues raised already today and to share some of the work that the Government are doing to support women and girls in the UK and around the world. I begin by saying, as many Members have also said, that my thoughts are with all those affected by the events in Ukraine at this very difficult time. So many Members have referred to the atrocities that have been going on in that country.

We strongly condemn the reported Russian attack on a maternity and children's hospital in Mariupol. An attack on a hospital constitutes a breach of international humanitarian law. The loss of innocent human lives is deplorable, and we call for this attack to be documented and investigated. Putin's directive to bomb a baby hospital is beyond barbaric. There can be no one more helpless than a new-born baby, and Putin's decision to hurt and kill women, babies, children and medical staff has outraged Members in this House, and people in this country and across the world.

We continue to stand united with our international partners in supporting the Government in Ukraine. International Women's Day provides us with an opportunity to reflect on our role in the international community, especially in supporting women and children affected by conflict around the world. I have been so inspired by

the women MPs in Ukraine, who no longer have their children in their arms, but instead hold an AK-47 assault weapon.

The issue of gender-based violence has featured heavily today. As some Members have pointed out, we are also reeling from the tragic deaths of Sarah Everard, Sabina Nessa and many of the women that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) so poignantly listed. That painfully long list of women killed by men is such a poignant and powerful, if not utterly tragic, reminder that more work must be done. I put on record my thanks to Karen Ingala Smith for compiling that record.

As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has said, we do not accept that violence against women and girls is inevitable. My hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) referred to the inevitability of sexual violence in conflict, but other hon. Members have said that they do not accept that. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has said that it is not inevitable and she is making it her top priority.

In October, the UK began the £67.5 million "What Works to Prevent Violence: Impact at Scale" programme in this country, which is the first global effort to scale up proven violence-prevention approaches. Earlier this week, the Government strengthened their world-leading efforts to end violence and harassment in the workplace by becoming the 11th country to ratify the International Labour Organisation's violence and harassment convention.

The safety of everyone in our country, wherever they are, is our priority, but we know that crimes such as domestic abuse and stalking disproportionately affect women and girls. Tackling such crimes remains a top priority for the Government. The tackling violence against women and girls strategy sets out areas of activity that are already under way and more than 50 new commitments to help to ensure that women and girls are safe everywhere—at home, online and on the streets.

We have made good progress on those commitments, including supporting the introduction of Deputy Chief Constable Maggie Blyth as the national police lead for violence against women and girls. We introduced our landmark Domestic Abuse Act 2021 to fundamentally transform our response to tackling that crime. As soon as parliamentary time allows, we will introduce a new duty on employers to take all reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace.

In my role in the Department for Transport, I have responsibility for the safety of women and girls on the transport network. I am fortunate to work alongside many inspirational women, particularly the Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton); Diane Gilpin, CEO of the Smart Green Shipping Alliance, who has worked in technology and design across Formula 1, banking and telecoms; and Maggie Aderin-Pocock, who is one of Britain's most famous mechanical engineers and space scientists, and who is currently using satellite technology to predict weather flows.

No one should ever have to face the risk of violence when travelling. This International Women's Day, I was proud to be in Birmingham to join our transport champions for tackling violence against women and girls to launch their 13 recommendations for making our transport networks safer in the short, medium and long term. Those proposals are a crucial step in the Government's

long-term commitment to ensure that women and girls can travel alone, safely and without fear. I look forward to collaborating across Government with police forces, local transport authorities and transport operators to respond to those recommendations.

Many hon. Members have referred to health. We are committed to improving women's health outcomes and reducing disparities. The Government are making women's voices heard and placing women's voices at the centre of that work. This week also marks LBT Women's Health Week. The Government recognise that, as part of that, we need to improve the current access to NHS fertility services in England for all couples, including those in same-sex partnerships.

Dame Diana Johnson: As the Minister is talking about women's health and women's voices, can she explain to the House why the Government have decided not to extend telemedicine for abortion services beyond the end of August this year?

Trudy Harrison: I have certainly heard those calls and I am sure that they have also been heard by Ministers in the Department of Health and Social Care. I understand that a review will take place, but I will ask my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to write to the right hon. Lady with a response.

Karin Smyth: To add to the point of my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), I watched the faces of the many brilliant women MPs present when that was mentioned and I think that Conservative Members are not aware of what their Government are doing against all the expert advice and against all the policy advice of the Department of Health and Social Care because of the individual conscience issues of some Ministers. I hope that the Minister does take those calls back, because that is clearly not the will of the House today.

Trudy Harrison: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and I just repeat what I have already said about liaising with Health Ministers. The wellbeing and safety of women requiring access to abortion services has been and will continue to be our first and foremost priority. The Department of Health is developing a new sexual and reproductive health strategy that will set out the ambitions to improve reproductive health outcomes and wellbeing. The strategy will include a focus on improving information and access to contraception to support women to make more informed choices, but on the specific point that she and the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) made, I will endeavour to liaise with colleagues.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The House will be reassured by what the Minister has just said about liaising with colleagues. Can I say through her to the Whips that if there is a clear vote in this House, I would vote to extend the telemedicine service and I would encourage my hon. Friends to do the same? I suggest that the Chief Whip asks his colleagues to consult each of us what our views are.

Trudy Harrison: I am sure my hon. Friend's comment has been heard.

There has been much talk about the economic empowerment for women, and this leads me on to some of the other steps we are taking to address the barriers that women face in the workforce. I myself was paid off when I was pregnant with our first child. We know that the pandemic has been one of the greatest challenges this country has faced in decades. Women's economic empowerment is pivotal to our post-pandemic recovery, in the wake of even greater potential for wage inequalities for women, although of course it is not just women who face these difficulties. We need to make it easier for all employees to understand if they are being paid fairly and how decisions about their pay are made, and I am really pleased that we are going to stop asking about pay history during recruitment.

There has also been much talk about STEM, which has been so wonderful to hear about. In 2022, education remains a top priority for our Prime Minister. Earlier this week, he launched a new girls' education skills partnership programme on private sector investment in girls' education, which supports adolescent girls overseas. We have made great progress in increasing the number of girls studying STEM subjects, but at present women make up only 24% of the STEM workforce.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Trudy Harrison: I am afraid that I cannot give way.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) referenced the importance of language, and it is so important that, as he says, we protect the language of females—of women, adult human females, girls, mothers, women who breastfeed and mothers who work. I think that is so important. It has been a pleasure to speak in this important debate.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Maria Miller.

4.58 pm

Mrs Miller: Madam Deputy Speaker, it is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair. I thank the 27 right hon. and hon. Members across the House for taking part, and the Minister who spoke in response to the debate for her advocacy for women on so many issues. I hope she is able to discuss the content of the issues raised today with the Minister for Women and other colleagues. The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald)—I hope I have pronounced that correctly—said it was groundhog day, and I am afraid I tend to agree with her on so many of these issues. When it comes to women in the House of Commons, we need to make sure that the Government, Parliament and the parties are working together to get more women into this place after the next election. I hope that the positive energy coming from today's debate goes out to the women around the world who live in areas of war, because it is those women who need our help and support the most.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have given notice to the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) that I would raise this point of order. She challenged me to clarify exactly what she had said, and to correct the record if I was wrong in suggesting that she had not answered a question clearly. The question she was asked by Emma Barnett on "Woman's Hour" was very simple. She was asked:

[Sir Bernard Jenkin]

"And Labour's definition of a woman?"

and she answered:

"Well, I have to say that there are different definitions legally around what a woman actually is. I mean, you look at the definition within the Equality Act, and I think it just says someone who is adult and female, I think, but then doesn't see how you define either of those things. I mean, obviously, that's then you've got the biological definition, legal definition."

I suggested that that answer was unclear. I think I am correct in my representation of that answer.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He said that he would endeavour to correct the record, and he has sought to do so. Would the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) like to follow that point of order?

Anneliese Dodds: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for giving me notice that he was going to make a point of order, but he actually stated that I was unable to define what a woman was. That is not true. I am a woman, obviously. Okay, we all occasionally might use the odd "um" or "ah" in an interview, but if he listened to what I said, I said "adult female, under the Equality Act." Also in that interview, which he did not quote, I said that the Equality Act protects on the basis of sex, although some of his comments and those of others intimated that I did not. I stated that there is a biological definition and also a legal definition. If he wants to dispute whether any of those definitions are extant, I am happy to have that discussion. I do not think that his argument would hold water, because it would not be a correct one. I feel that he should still withdraw those

original remarks, but I accept that, at least from his point of view, he has attempted to set out his view. I do, however, think it is a mistaken one.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for answering that point of order. There is clearly a difference of opinion, and that is not a matter on which the Chair can adjudicate, and nor should the Chair try to. The facts have been satisfactorily put on the record, and I am grateful to everyone concerned for doing so.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this house has considered International Women's Day.

PETITION

Barnet Police Station

5.2 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): This petition, and its online equivalent, have been signed by more than 1,000 people, because they want to save Barnet police station. The Mayor of London has shut the front desk and now wants to sell off the building, and we want to stop him doing that.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Chipping Barnet,

Declares that petitioners strongly object to the Mayor of London's decision to close Barnet Police Station and his subsequent plans to sell off the building.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to press the Mayor of London to drop his plans to permanently close Barnet Police Station and to work to re-open it as soon as possible.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002716]

Sir Richard Shepherd

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Scott Mann.)

5.3 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): It is with both sadness and pleasure that I speak in this debate as a tribute to my dear friend, Richard Shepherd, a friendship that extended almost 40 years. I have written a tribute to Richard in this week's *House* magazine. He was one of my closest political and personal friends. How often did we lunch together in his favourite Italian restaurants, discussing how we were going to extract ourselves from the subjugation of European government? It is entirely appropriate for this tribute to be on the Floor of this House of Commons, whose attention he held on every occasion. I feel him here now. He was a most unusual speaker. He only did so when he felt he had to, but when he did it was always an intensely emotional experience. He reminded me somewhat of what we have heard of Charles James Fox in the late 18th century, and particularly Fox's last exchange with his friend Edmund Burke at the time of the French revolution, with tears streaming down Fox's face as they parted company.

I remember, too, heady days when my wife Biddy and I spent time on holiday with Richard in Florida and elsewhere. Later in his life, I would sit in his drawing room opposite a painting of Clumber park, where in my youth I often played cricket, or on the telephone recalling our great parliamentary battles and our friendships with other patriots, so many of whom have sadly died. I am glad to say that Chris Gill still lives near us in Shropshire.

I strongly recommend that hon. Members read Richard's speech of 21 February 1992 on his private Member's Bill for a referendum on the European issue. The Bill was drafted at my suggestion by one of the Government's former parliamentary counsel, Godfrey Carter. Margaret Thatcher came to the debate and voted with us shortly before she left the House of Commons. In that speech, he said of Maastricht:

"I belong to a union—the Union of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is a political allegiance which I gladly give. It is one of sentiment, one of passion, one which has been fashioned over the course of centuries. That is to be set aside because the Treaty of Union seeks to make me a citizen of elsewhere. I would be a citizen with a profound and essential difference: I could not control the laws, in whole areas, by which I would be governed."—[*Official Report*, 21 February 1992; Vol. 204, c. 581.]

His Protection of Official Information Bill largely became law, and he voted against the Government on the Scott report as well as at many other important moments in our political life over the last 30 years.

On so many evenings as we left the Chamber late at night, particularly during Maastricht, Richard would simply say, "See you down there," by which he meant the Members' entrance, where his car would pull up to give me the inevitable lift on the way to his home in Kensington, which was once owned by John Galsworthy, who wrote "The Forsyte Saga" there. He was Back Bencher of the year in 1985 and parliamentarian of the year 10 years later. He was greatly loved by his constituents of Aldridge-Brownhills, where he increased his majority by 10,000 between 1979 and 2010.

Richard created Partridges, the famous food store now in Duke of York Square, which gained a royal warrant. He took advice from Garry Weston, who owned Fortnum and Mason. I am so glad that Richard's brother, John, who is managing director, is in the Gallery with his family. Davida, his sister, was his ever diligent parliamentary assistant.

This being a Thursday afternoon on a one-line whip, some of his parliamentary friends cannot be here. I will therefore briefly read out some of their tributes to him. The chairman of the 1922 Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), said:

"Richard was a great defender of liberty and democracy. He never forgot that the sacred duty of our Parliament is to protect the hard-won freedoms of the British people and to guard against the growth of an over-mighty Executive. He was a principled and courageous man who made a great contribution to public life."

My right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) said:

"Richard Shepherd was an outstanding parliamentarian who devoted his work to advancing and upholding, as he put it, our very sense of liberty and confidence in our system of government and its institutions. As such, he was an admirable and remarkable man."

My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) said:

"Richard was a passionate campaigner for the rights of Parliament and democracy and in doing so was not afraid of either Ministers or Whips, who he frequently annoyed. I was working for Margaret Thatcher and remember well her robust arguments with him over freedom of information but also the respect she had for his always principled position. Parliament and the country owe him a considerable debt."

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said:

"Richard was a true gentleman, a great independent, committed free spirit and a truly kind man."

My hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) said:

"Richard was a superb parliamentarian. He spoke his mind even when it was not popular with party leadership. He was proved right far more often than not. He was unwavering in his determination to see the UK out of the EU superstate. He will be missed."

My hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) said:

"Richard was a man of principle who would never stay silent when he saw our cherished liberties being undermined. He put his country before his own advancement and was a fine example of a true parliamentarian in the great tradition of England."

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) said:

"Richard represented everything that is best about an MP. He was a gentleman with the emphasis on gentle; but with a steely determination to act fearlessly in the best interests of our country."

My hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) said:

"I remember Richard as an excellent and principled Parliamentarian, a kind and thoughtful colleague, and one who would do what he could to help his friends. I was sorry to hear of his passing and send my condolences to his family."

Notice the word "gentle", the word "kind"; that was the measure of the man.

I would also like to put on record that several Opposition Members have also paid tribute to Richard, such as the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) and the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz).

5.10 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I am greatly moved by the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) and the memory of our friend the former Member for Aldridge-Brownhills, whom, as a new Member, one was rather scared of, because his emotion could be so overpowering and his passion could be so devastating. I learned at first hand how that could be harnessed to the public good when I, as a young spokesman on constitutional affairs, was conducting the opposition to the Scotland Act 1998, which laid down the foundations of the devolution settlement that we are now trying to make work. Everything that he warned about that Act has come true, including the way that it has divided Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom politically and emotionally, the way that it has been exploited by nationalists and narrow nationalism, and the way that it has led to a political and legal dispute between the Parliaments and Governments of the United Kingdom and Scotland.

I also have to put on record one word that Richard kept raising with great passion: “consanguinity”. He kept talking about the consanguinity of a united people—that is, we are all a people of a common blood. Personally, I think our consanguinity goes wider than the United Kingdom, but he believed this with such force and it pains me greatly that so many of his predictions came true. He was a wonderful parliamentarian and I will never forget him.

5.12 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): What is so striking about all those quotations from parliamentary colleagues is that they are absolutely interchangeable. They were all written separately and they all said the same things. I can take that one step further because in preparation for this event this evening, I took the trouble to look up the obituaries in a variety of papers, ranging from *The Guardian* on the left to *The Daily Telegraph* on the right. And guess what? Those tributes are absolutely interchangeable, too. They talk about his independence of mind, his integrity and the fact that he was a true gentleman and a man of principle.

All I can add that I do not think has been said before is that, as somebody who has been here for merely almost 25 years—I am therefore a relative newcomer by comparison with my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) and, indeed, Richard—I believe that he set an example that all of us were proud to follow, sometimes even to the point of having the Whip suspended for a little while.

5.13 pm

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) on his very moving speech. I had the pleasure of knowing Sir Richard, not for as many years as my hon. Friend, but when I was a young man, I was first an undergraduate and then a graduate student at the London School of Economics—Richard’s alma mater—and he was a great hero of mine.

My hon. Friend mentioned a speech that he gave on 21 February 1992. I was living in Berlin at the time, and I spent a lot of time in the British Council library trying

to understand what on earth was going on in my own land while I was living abroad learning German. Richard was a beacon for me at that time, and I commend the speech to which my hon. Friend referred. In a book, Edward Pearce, the journalist, referred to Richard’s speech on that date, on Second Reading of the Referendum Bill, as belonging in any anthology of great parliamentary speeches. Colleagues can look it up for themselves. It begins at column 581. I want to quote the last sentence because it has been for me a beacon for many years and showed how well Richard understood the central issue within the European question. He said:

“I say as a last note to the House that our people should ‘not go gentle into that good night’ but should rather ‘rage, rage, against the dying of the light’ that requires us to live under laws that we cannot change or control.”

Sir William Cash: I want to add a little bit to what my hon. Friend has just said. He was followed immediately after that speech by no less a person than Mr Peter Shore, the great Labour exponent of dislike of the idea of European government. He said:

“I think that the House will be grateful to the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) for introducing the Bill and giving us an opportunity of addressing the most important issue that has come before us during the lifetime of this Parliament, which will shortly end.

The House will also be grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the clarity and passion with which he argued his case.”—[*Official Report*, 21 February 1992; Vol. 204, c. 589.]

And there was more besides.

Mr Bacon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I have that text in front of me. When I was a teenager, my father lived in Canada and I spent a lot of time going over there. Peter Shore was for a while the Trade Secretary or Transport Secretary and tried to thwart Freddie Laker’s attempt to introduce cheap airline tickets. As a very young man, I was extremely interested in cheap airline tickets. It took me some years to realise what a great man Peter Shore actually was, and my hon. Friend has done us a service in reminding us of that now.

In conclusion, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I thank you for the chance to speak in this debate? I hope that we all remember Sir Richard Shepherd for his extraordinary contribution.

5.16 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Richard Shepherd was a gentle spirit and a poetic soul, as illustrated by the contributions of my right hon. and hon. Friends. I simply want to add to the accounts of his generosity, civility and courtesy. I invited Richard to speak in my constituency, and with typical humility he said, “Really? I don’t very often get invited to travel across the country to speak.” But surely enough, he did. He travelled from Aldridge-Brownhills to the Lincolnshire fens and addressed a luncheon function. He charmed everyone not by what he said but by the way he was. What he said, accorded closely with my own views, of course, but that is not really the point I want to make. He was such a humble, gentle, poetic soul.

I well remember that on that occasion I gave him a small gift of a watercolour that I had painted. Years later he said to me, “I treasure that painting you gave me, John. I treasure that painting.” It touched my heart, as

he touched the hearts of so many people here, so many from his constituency and so many people more widely. I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) for the chance to pay this tribute to a very great parliamentarian and a still greater man.

5.18 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I got stuck trying to get back for this debate. I will not detain the House for long, because I know that my hon. Friend the Minister will want to say something herself because of her own connection with Sir Richard Shepherd.

I arrived in this House in 1992, when the Maastricht treaty was in full flow, or at least was about to be. I was greeted by two people. One was my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), who destroyed the rest of my career, and the other was Richard Shepherd, who finished off the job. They persuaded me that my base instincts were the right ones and therefore I should give evidence to them by voting against the Government. I did, in fact, and was persuaded by them to do that. Richard was kindness personified, as I am sure many people have said. He was very interesting and amusing, but we forget that it was not just on Maastricht that he was so emboldened. He led the charge in the Conservative party on freedom: he was a forerunner of freedom of information and of the rights of whistleblowers. He challenged even the great Lady Thatcher herself, and she became very frustrated with him on a number of occasions, but, much as he adored and supported her, he still rebelled against her when the need was there.

I came to the House in 1992, a young Member full of hopes and aspirations; and then I saw Richard, who never sought public office, who thought that being here was enough in itself and that making your mark through your intellect, courage and determination would leave behind you a record of success to which many who might enter ministerial office could never point a finger—and to that extent I thank God for Richard Shepherd.

5.20 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) for introducing so ably this very important debate, which has been graced by a number of wonderful tributes to Sir Richard Shepherd that I cannot hope to match. All I would say is that in my 20 years in the House—I am one of the most junior Members to contribute this evening—I came to regard Richard Shepherd as a man of infinite principle combined with charm and good humour. That is not a bad thing to say about any Member of Parliament from any party in the House. He never wavered in his belief that one day the United Kingdom would become master again of its own destiny. My hon. Friend the Member for Stone will understand what I am about to say: if Richard Shepherd had been here on 29 March 2019, he would have been a Spartan too.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): No one has yet mentioned Richard Shepherd's passionate defence of the rights of this place and the Members of this place. I well remember, before the days when we had automatic timetable motions—new Members will

not be able to imagine that there could have been such days, when we did not have timetable motions and the Government had to introduce a so-called guillotine motion if they wanted to curtail the debate on any Bill or, indeed, any matter—that Richard Shepherd used to sit there, on the second Bench below the Gangway, and oppose and speak against and vote against and force a vote upon every single guillotine motion that the Government brought in. That had quite an effect. It was hard to believe then that he was in fact such a charming, passionate gentleman.

Sir William Cash: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. He also sought to be Speaker, and he received 136 votes in that contest. Heaven alone knows what would have happened if he had managed to win it.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the answer to that point of order is that we would have been sitting all night, every night.

5.23 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton): Let me first convey my grateful thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) for securing the debate, and for sharing with us all so many memories and so many stories, but also for sharing his tributes with those of colleagues. You shared one of your own memories, Madam Deputy Speaker. We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon), and my right hon. Friends the Members for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), and for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois). On a Thursday afternoon, when many Members will have left for their constituencies, the fact that so many colleagues are here this evening is a huge tribute to Richard.

Richard—Sir Richard—was a decent man. He was fair, honest and thoroughly principled, as we have heard. He was someone who cared for his constituency and his constituents. It was said that when many cared about spin, Richard cared about substance. Today has been an opportunity for Members to share their feelings and their condolences. I know, as the current Member of Parliament for Aldridge-Brownhills, that in the last couple of weeks constituents from right across the constituency—I do not know whether to call it my constituency or his constituency: our constituency, perhaps—have emailed me, stopped me in the local supermarket and approached me in Aldridge village, on Brownhills High Street and in the communities in between, to share their stories and ask me to pass on their sympathies, which I have duly done. They have expressed the joy that they felt and that was felt across the constituency when Richard was knighted. He made a difference to the lives of so many people. One constituent said:

“To call on Sir Richard in a time of need was to know that he would do all he could to either assist with the problem himself or find someone who could.”

That is important to all of us in this place.

It did not matter which political persuasion someone came from; many local people had reason to be grateful for Richard's help. I would like to share one story that

[Wendy Morton]

was shared with me by a constituent. I am sure she will not mind me naming her: she is a lady called Sue Satterthwaite. She is our local historian in Aldridge. She told me that when David Partridge received his MBE, Sir Richard invited him, three members of his family and Sue for a tour of Parliament. Richard met everyone in Westminster Hall, and after a few moments, he asked Sue to step a little to the left. When she asked why, he said:

“That is perfect. I know how much you value our democracy and the history of this place. You are standing on the exact spot where Charles I received his death sentence.”

Sue shared that story with me. For that constituent, Sir Richard created one of the most memorable days that she had experienced. That was something that he was able to do. It is also a powerful reminder of the importance of democracy, as we watch all that is going on around the world, particularly at the moment.

I join my hon. Friends in this place this evening to pay tribute to Sir Richard Shepherd, my predecessor, who I know represented his constituents with a tremendous sense of duty and purpose. As we have heard, he was a strong and independent voice. He was never one to shy away from the controversial debate, and he was often

even argumentative. He is remembered by some as a Maastricht rebel, back in the 1990s, and in holding true to his views on the European Union he remained fearless, as we have heard. His often principled stance is to be celebrated. His record in defence of whistleblowers and his fight for transparency is to be applauded. He was greatly loved and respected in Aldridge-Brownhills for 36 years, and greatly respected by his friends and colleagues in this place. He was a fine parliamentarian, and our thoughts are with his family at this time.

It has been an absolute privilege to respond to this debate on behalf of the Government, and I again say to thank you to my hon. Friend the Member for Stone.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am sure the whole House would like to thank the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) for having secured this debate and provided an opportunity for the House to pay tribute to one of its greatest ever Members. Sir Richard was a passionate parliamentarian, and we will not see his like again.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 10 March 2022

[JUDITH CUMMINS *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Covid-19: Deteriorating Long-Term Health Conditions

1.30 pm

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered people with deteriorating long-term health conditions during the covid-19 pandemic.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Cummins. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for this debate on what I believe is an important topic: dealing with the deterioration in people with long-term conditions during the covid-19 pandemic. On several occasions in Westminster Hall and the Chamber, we have discussed the various impacts of the pandemic on the health service and various sections of society, but this issue has not been highlighted before, so I am grateful for the opportunity. I thank hon. Members who have supported the debate.

It is worth remembering that we are dealing here with a range of conditions, and I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. As Members know, I have a family interest in rehabilitation for survivors of stroke, which I will certainly touch on. However, we are not simply talking about stroke. There are many other conditions that affect people, including cardiovascular conditions, neurological conditions such as multiple sclerosis, and cystic fibrosis—to name but a few. They have all been affected in one way or another by the consequences of the pandemic. That is why a number of the organisations who support people with such conditions—I am grateful to various charities, to which I will refer in a moment—have come together to assist us in bringing together some information for the debate, which we think needs greater public airing.

There are hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people in the UK with long-term conditions, which range from stroke and dementia to Parkinson's and spinal injury. They have all been particularly affected, and often acutely affected, by the pandemic. Sadly, some people have lost their lives during the pandemic, and we must be honest and recognise that. Some people may be clinically vulnerable as a result of their condition. In other cases, people will be more vulnerable because of other factors that are linked to their condition. In both circumstances, however, they have suffered because of the effects of the pandemic, and we need to turn that situation around.

We all know that, for many people in society, the lockdowns and other restrictions that we had to have meant social isolation and the suspension or adaptation of things that they were used to doing. However, the pandemic has had a much greater impact on people with long-term conditions than on the rest of us, because it meant missing out on crucial support from informal

carers—the family and friends who come in and help—and fewer opportunities to use the cognitive, physical and social abilities that are so important for rehabilitation. Trying to keep one's mobility going is one example. If someone is unable to do that for a number of months, it is inevitable that the situation can deteriorate and the adverse effects of the condition progress. That is a real and measurable impact.

Some conditions are progressive, meaning that they get worse over time, whereas others are not. However, even where they do progress over time, it does not mean that the level of progression of the condition cannot be arrested and delayed with support and therapy. It can make a difference for everyone.

Of course, there is an impact on mental health as well as physical health. For example, the Stroke Association's research suggests that 69% of stroke survivors feel more anxious and depressed than before the pandemic. Similarly, people suffering from MS and other neurological conditions have found it tougher during the pandemic. Some 29% of people with MS have had appointments cancelled or delayed, and 53% said there had been a reduction in specialist support.

The British Heart Foundation has raised particular concerns, to which I am sure we will return, about delays in diagnosis and treatment for people with heart conditions. That includes preventive measures—diagnosis and then drugs that can prevent worsening cardiovascular conditions.

The situation is similar, too, for people in the UK living with cystic fibrosis. It is a smaller number—some 10,800 in the UK—but again, they are particularly vulnerable. Many found that specialist staff with respiratory expertise were being redeployed elsewhere, which created challenges for the specialist units dealing with them. People have had real difficulties right across the board.

The pandemic also meant the suspension of many community rehabilitation services. That is important, because those services are often delivered by a range of therapists. In the case of stroke, for example, that will involve physiotherapists, speech and language therapists, clinical psychologists and occupational therapists. For other conditions, people will have dieticians, podiatrists and others. Community rehab services underwent an enormous change in the pandemic, and with many staff being redeployed elsewhere, we need a strategy for getting them back. We need a strategy right across the piece for recovery from the pandemic in relation to these long-term conditions. I have made calls in this House in the past for a long-term strategy and plan to deal with stroke, but the same applies to many of these other conditions too, and they all ought to be linked together.

In the case of stroke, about half of stroke survivors had therapy appointments or home care visits cancelled, and of course many people—this applies to other conditions too—felt unsafe going into hospital for appointments, so we need to be catching up fast. Virtual therapy can work in some cases. For example, my wife's speech and language therapy was able to be done online to some degree, but she cannot do the physiotherapy online in the same way, which leaves a significant gap. If I may, I will start with stroke and then move on to the other conditions, simply because stroke is the one that I am most familiar with.

[Sir Robert Neill]

The rehabilitation for stroke survivors is just such an important part of the pathway. We sometimes think of it as something that happens only in the first weeks and months after a stroke. That is not the case. Research increasingly shows that, with good rehab, people can continue to improve over a significant number of years after their stroke. Unfortunately, we are not delivering the level of services for the length of time that we would wish and that the Government want to deliver them for. NHS England's national stroke service model outlines the aspiration for all stroke survivors to receive rehab support for as long as they can benefit from it. It should not be time limited but, as of April 2021, 58% of services were time rather than needs based. That does not seem to have improved; the situation has been made harder by the pandemic.

Of course, not only is rehabilitation important for the individual's quality of life but it makes a cost saving. If we could get more people on the stroke pathway receiving early supported discharge rehabilitation, that could save about £1,600 over five years. That may not seem a vast amount, but when we think about the significant number of stroke survivors in this country, it is a really worthwhile saving, even in relation to that one condition.

We have done great work in improving acute stroke care, but what we have not done at the same pace is keep up with the rehab and life after stroke. That has been the Cinderella end of the service, and I think that that is true for many other conditions too. There was a lack of consistent provision even before the pandemic, and unfortunately the pandemic has made that situation worse.

I will quote one stroke survivor's carer referring to what happened after their family member's stroke in early 2020:

"My mum has severe dysphasia and with no speech therapy for 5 weeks while with me, and limited speech therapy while in hospital, her progress is not what it should be. This is severely impacting on her recovery and wellbeing."

I know personally the importance of consistency in speech therapy and other matters. A stroke survivor says:

"I have felt my mobility worsen as my usual exercise activities were not available".

Nobody disputes that some restrictions were necessary. What I am saying now is that we need to have an urgent plan, with funding behind it and a set of measures and goals, and a means of measuring attainment of those goals, to ensure that we catch up across the piece.

The latest snap figures suggest that we are struggling to meet even our own aspirations. Just one third of community rehab teams meet treatment time targets. Over 43% have waits of 15 days or more and, alarmingly, stroke survivors wait, on average, 10 weeks to see a psychologist. One of the things that people really do not appreciate about strokes is the significant psychological impacts that can occur. Unless we get the psychological issues resolved as best we can, that has an impact on the survivor's ability to get the maximum benefit from the other therapies available. That is why it is really important. There is a real opportunity to join those various things together, to allow people to regain the skills that they have lost, and to hone and keep the skills that they retained after their stroke, or other condition. That would bring both social and economic benefits for all.

Community rehabilitation services for all these conditions have been hugely overstretched. Just 17.3% of stroke patient received the guideline recommended levels of support in 2021. We have discussed in the House before the real problem with a workforce strategy. Allied health professional representative bodies have all said that they are willing to step up to the plate, but they need the numbers. It is particularly difficult to get speech therapists, neuro-psychologists and so on. We need to do more on that.

I recognise that the Government are doing a lot more to improve things in many areas of the NHS, but we need to do that on rehabilitation as well. In addition to the other benefits that I listed, rehabilitation ultimately means fewer visits to GPs, less delayed discharge, and less demand, in the end, for acute care in the health sector and for social care as people get older and struggle with other issues. It reduces demand right across the piece.

The 2021 paper "Moving forward stronger" had contributions from some 20 charities and professional bodies representing a range of conditions. It was headed up by the Alzheimer's Society, which called for a fully funded national rehabilitation strategy to run for two years, and for the NHS to appoint a national clinical lead to implement it. I welcome the fact that NHS England has appointed Jennifer Keane as its first director of rehabilitation. That is good news. The devolved Administrations do not yet have one; I hope that they will soon follow that example, and that this debate will enlighten some of the priorities that I hope the new director will have in drawing up her programme of work. We ought to have strategies for rehabilitation in local areas, as well as at a national level, to ensure that things are delivered on the ground. We have part of it but, although we have the director, we do not as yet have the strategy for her to work to and implement. That is the bit that I hope the Minister will assure me is coming next.

I referred to strokes, but I will touch briefly on some other conditions. I mentioned MS, which affects about 130,000 people in the UK. If we look at neurology overall, about one in six people in the UK is living with a neurological condition of one kind or another. Again, management throughout the pathway can really improve outcomes for people with those conditions. I mentioned the number of MS appointments that were cancelled. One in four people surveyed by the MS Society had not seen an MS nurse or neurologist in the past 12 months but needed to, so there is a glaring gap in provision.

I talked about a workforce strategy. Here is another area of the workforce. Adjusting for population, France and Germany have over seven neurologists for every two in the UK. We need to up recruitment into those specialist skills. That is a significant difference from our two largest and nearest comparative western European advanced economies. There should not be that level of divergence between us and France and Germany.

An audit of 51 UK MS services in 2020—while the pandemic was going on, but before the whole consequences had worked their way through—found that, on average, neurologists had caseloads of 1,815 patients with MS. The recommended caseload is 615, but the average caseload is nearly three times that recommendation, demonstrating the need to redouble our efforts on workforce. Some 64% of professionals said that it was not only recruitment that was an issue, but also staff leaving the neurology workforce. We need a strategy for recruitment and a strategy for retention.

For stroke services, when my wife was in the rehab unit, we could see quite a marked turnover of staff. They were good people, but we were unable to keep them, unfortunately, even in a trust with a specialist unit and rewarding work, very close to London. The situation is probably even harder in other parts of the country.

For many people with cystic fibrosis, the isolation has been particularly acute, because of their particular vulnerabilities. They had to shield as they were at acute risk. That has made it harder to bring forward their return into society. The Cystic Fibrosis Trust awarded 713 covid-related grants between April and September 2020, including 101 due to loss of work, and 96 due to financial difficulties, because people were unable, due to the need to shield and the lack of support, to carry on as they were otherwise doing. We cannot condemn people to that twilight situation for very much longer.

Finally, I turn to cardiovascular conditions. I am plucking out only four conditions, but there are others. We could talk about Alzheimer's and dementia, and many other things—perhaps other hon. Members will.

The British Heart Foundation suggests that in the first year of the pandemic England saw around 5,800 excess heart and circulatory disease deaths—some because of medical factors, but some because of the difficulty in getting acute treatment. Beyond that, there are 61,000 people in England who had been waiting more than six weeks for an echocardiogram—a heart ultrasound—at the end of November 2021, which is 20 times than before the pandemic. The Minister may have more up-to-date figures, and I hope she will be able to tell us that they are coming down, but, if not, we need a strategy to make that happen.

Analysis from the Institute for Public Policy Research found 470,000 fewer new prescriptions of preventive cardiovascular drugs were issued between March and October 2020 compared with the previous year. That potentially translates into 12,000-odd extra heart attacks over the next five years or so that might otherwise be preventable. If people are not diagnosed and given the preventive drugs, the risk of acute attack becomes that much higher.

NHS England's statistics show that the number of people in England waiting more than six weeks for a diagnostic echocardiogram had climbed to 64,962—very specific—at the end of September. The key point is that that is 44% of those waiting. The number fell slightly by November, to 61,000, and I wait to see how much more it has fallen by now. At the end of February 2020, there were 3,238 people waiting. That is a massive jump, demonstrating the scale of the mountain we have to climb to get back to where we are before the pandemic. At the end of December 2021, in all, some 300,000 heart patients were waiting for care of one kind or another, be that emergency, urgent, elective or routine, in so far as anything is routine in such treatment, and some 29% had been waiting for more than 18 weeks.

I know the Government do not want that to be the case. They have real ambitions to reduce such waiting times, as I think all parties in this House do, but the point of this debate is to highlight how significant the issue is to make sure it is no longer the bit of the health service that gets forgotten about because it does not grab the headlines in the same way that waiting lists for acute care, operations and other things do. It is just as

profoundly important for people's lives, the lives of their families and for the community as a whole. That is why I am grateful for the chance to raise these issues.

I hope the Minister will respond and set out what the Government intend to do by way of a specific strategy and set out a timeframe, its objectives, how it will be implemented, how its success will be measured, how it will deal with the workforce, and how funding will be made available. I hope that we will have a useful debate going forward, Mrs Cummins, and I am grateful for the time to put these matters before the House.

1.51 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is always a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Cummins. I thank the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) for opening the debate and for putting a lot of material as well as a lot of data before us to consider, which is incredibly useful. I am also indebted to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing today's debate to go ahead.

Even pre-pandemic, there were many challenges for people with long-term health conditions and their management. There was a really good focus on the acute phase, but as people moved into the more chronic phase of their illness, the amount of rehabilitation and support individuals received waned. It was dependent on geography, where someone lived, and on how many in-person interventions they had. Through that time people's baselines lowered as their function decreased, but it did not need to decrease. That is why it is so important to look at the issue today.

I echo the remarks of the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst on prevention. Of course, prevention is always better than cure, and having a strong public health strategy is crucial. In the acute and early intervention phases, many people missed out during the pandemic. We think about delays in diagnosis, the scale of treatment that people had because clinicians were placed elsewhere, and the value of input. We have talked about strokes today, and people having fewer rehabilitation sessions and less intervention from some of the leading clinicians, which meant they did not leave hospital at the same level that perhaps they did pre-pandemic. We need to pick that up now.

Early discharge has put more pressure on achieving a good baseline for somebody to move into the more chronic phase, the longer phase, of their rehabilitation. We know that once somebody goes home they do not have the physio nagging them every day and telling them to do certain things, so their function deteriorates unless there is good community intervention, which is what I want to focus my remarks on today.

We are talking about a broad range of conditions—neurodegenerative and other neurological conditions. The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst set out some of those, but we can think about motor neurone disease, where time is simply not on your side, or Parkinson's, where intervention is really important to ensure people maintain function.

We have learnt a lot about respiratory conditions over the last two years with covid, and suddenly lungs have come into central view. Cystic fibrosis has been mentioned. Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease is a condition that really does need good management in the community. There are cardiovascular, psychological

[Rachael Maskell]

and other conditions. We must remember that comorbidity is an issue that impacts on and intersects with many conditions. Somebody who has a combination of COPD and Alzheimer's will often not remember or be able to steer the management of their condition. As a result, they are perhaps more susceptible to getting an infection and then finding it difficult to clear their lungs or to follow whatever treatment is prescribed, so they are more at risk and early morbidity is a serious risk factor. Therefore, we need to consider these issues in that context.

As I said, intervention at the acute phase of a disease can be intense, but it is about what happens next. We know that often there are not enough rehabilitation beds available to continue someone's treatment. I have always argued that the convalescent stage is also really important for people to build their confidence, which is often what is needed after the acute stage. That is where the biggest challenge lies.

As the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst outlined, some services have been able to be delivered through new mechanisms, such as Zoom, that simply were not there before. However, as a physiotherapist myself who spent 20 years working in this area, I must say that I would find stroke rehabilitation very difficult on Zoom, and anything involving respiratory medicine as well, because it is all about diagnosing and treating people through the physiotherapist's hands. Body-to-body contact is absolutely crucial in the development of interventions. Clearly, the lack of it has impeded people's rehabilitation and had an impact on it. It is not just physiotherapy or occupational therapy that are affected; other services, from dietetics right through to psychological therapies, are also affected. For somebody who is already impaired, face-to-face contact is vital, particularly if they are neurologically impaired and have just had a new diagnosis. Therefore, the risks of a patient regressing and not reaching their baseline, and then regressing further from that, are even greater.

The NHS is in some ways now coming under greater pressure than it did during the covid period. My concern is that the focus, politically and clinically, will be on the elective list and those numbers—we will drive up those numbers for sure and the Government will look at them—and will move on to dealing with acute care as it appears and to dealing with the elective backlog. GPs will of course make the same call, saying, "Look at our waiting lists, look at what is happening here." Consequently, people with long-term conditions will be squeezed out of the system. That is why I am really grateful to the hon. Member for securing this debate. People absolutely need intervention. Without it, their progress and even their functions will decrease, and that will put even more pressure on both social care and the health system. The debate today is therefore really timely, allowing us to consider the new pathways that need to be created in order to support people with long-term conditions. They have been the poor relation for some time and we cannot let that situation continue.

In the last decade or so, Labour in particular has been looking at pathways that could be developed, such as the expert patient, which enabled people to have control and management of their own disease. Enabling the patient to lead wherever possible is really important. New technology has come on board. Under this

Government there has been a particular focus on how new technology can help to provide support, measure things and move medicine forward. All those interventions are absolutely welcome, but they should not detract from the importance of the physical interventions that are necessary. We must ensure we maintain that baseline, so that if somebody does regress, we can give them an injection of rehabilitation to get them back up again to their normal functioning. It is really important to do that in a timely way.

I very much look at this issue from a physical perspective because of my professional background, but I recognise that people with other clinical expertise and competencies will look at their particular field and the need that particular types of intervention. As the hon. Member said, it is right that people have the correct balance between physical and psychological health, and they have to be brought into one space. Sadly, if someone has a physical diagnosis, the psychological aspect is often left behind, because doctors are looking at the primary root of someone's condition. We must look at people far more holistically than we do currently.

I therefore want to set out a four-stage rehabilitation service to support the physical and psychological needs of people living with chronic ill health. Taking that approach forward will need funding and a workforce plan, which the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), has been incredibly powerful in calling for. I see a concept in which the first phase looks at assessment and measurement, the second at self-management, the third at therapeutic interventions, and the fourth at the psychosocial support, which is also needed.

First, interventions clearly need to be individualised. Everybody is unique in their presentation. We need to recognise that there is an opportunity to develop the service not only in domiciliary settings, but in rehab settings and, for some, in group settings. We have lost some of the collective healthcare that is important for not only the socialisation of health, but the encouragement from one patient to another. We have to capture that again. Often, a patient will be encouraged by seeing somebody else doing what they want to do and that will spur them on to go that little bit further.

Secondly, we have to look at patient management and how people enter services. It should be a given that patients will continue with their interventions once they leave formal healthcare settings. We need to make sure there is a continuum of regular assessment and monitoring. For some individuals, some of that assessment and monitoring can be done at home, but some of it will need external intervention.

Thirdly, regular support may not always require an intensive burst of intervention—sometimes it will—but if it can enhance function, it does need to be examined. I looked at some statistics provided by the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy. Only 15% of people with lung disease deemed eligible for pulmonary rehab are able to access it, which is quite shocking and we really need to address that. Some 50% of people eligible for cardiac rehab cannot access it. From running cardiac rehab classes, I know how people gain confidence from rehab to do things they never thought they would be able to do. They no longer live in fear, but live a confident life.

One in five people receive post-hip fracture rehab on discharge. I know of many cases where all the money is spent on repairing somebody's hip or getting them a new hip, then getting them up, standing and walking in hospital, only for them to go home and just sit in a chair. Those patients then become fearful, which means social care has to come in, costing the NHS and the care system. It also means that somebody loses their independence, which is the biggest cost of all. This issue needs to be addressed.

Some 44% of people with a neurological condition do not access the services they need. We have a big amount of catching up to do. The biggest thing is that if somebody loses their confidence there is a rapid decline. We must remember that many of these people are elderly and live on their own. They do not have the interventions and the injection of hope that they need. We are talking about life-changing events—people's whole world is reoriented. We need to make sure that patients maintain social connection, where possible, and are able to access that support.

Waiting lists for elective treatment have become so long. I cannot remember if we are at 6.2 million people or more, but with those kinds of figures many people will need additional support—for example with their diet, or they may be less mobile—so as not to trigger other thresholds that further delay their surgery. It is important that people do not become sedentary and that they have the support they need. If people have a lung disease, it is important that they do not increase the damage to their lungs, lose function or become psychologically impaired, because it is then harder to regain function. We do not want to see people spiralling, which can happen very quickly. Once people get into that place—which is not a great place to be—it is much harder to get people back, so let us really focus on that area.

Fourthly, I want to talk about people living with chronic conditions. Often, people get locked into a space where their life has changed so much that they become more isolated. They lose those social connections, and they also lose their ability to move forward. That might be because, for instance, they have lost their speech, or they might not have the same ability to communicate with people in all sorts of ways. We need to look at how we bring social prescribing into this agenda, as well as the voluntary sector and community support, which is necessary. I want the Minister to look at different pathways to bring that whole family of measures together. Often, we have isolated that into the various parts of someone's body or mind, as opposed to looking at the person holistically.

Of course, if someone is more isolated, they may experience more loneliness and that impacts on anxiety, depression, motivation and function. People's skills and confidence then decline even further. We need to ensure the programme has the resources it needs. People are whole beings, and we need to recognise that in our health systems. For too long, we have talked about arms and legs or lungs and brains, but we do not talk about people, and it is people who need that support. If we can look at such a model, we need to think carefully about how we socialise our health system.

I have been looking, in a completely different context, at fostering. There is a programme called the Mockingbird programme. I do not know if the Minister has heard

of it, but groups and different people come and support the family. It may be an individual, a partner and their carer, or a family unit. They get that more community-based support. In the context of fostering, it is different families, so there is that concept of a community raising a child. Why do we not look at that for later in life for people with chronic conditions and for how we can provide support? Carers are often with their partners for weeks at a time with hardly any social interaction, and that can be quite telling if someone has an acute psychological condition as well.

Much more can be done for carers, as well as patients, as we move forward. We need a strategy, a workforce plan and funding. In this new world of integrated care partnerships, we have an opportunity to deliver that. July is day one. That is the moment to break out of the past which has let down people with long-term health conditions and move into a new era. I very much hope the Minister will be able to bring that forward.

Judith Cummins (in the Chair): I aim to start the Front-Bench speeches no later than 2.28 pm.

2.8 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Cummins. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) on securing the debate and thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. I join colleagues in thanking a coalition of charities and organisations that have come forward to support us with research and briefings in advance of the debate, particularly the “Moving forward stronger” policy paper.

Prior to being elected in 2019, I also had a background working in the national health service. Never in my wildest nightmares could I have imagined so early on in the job, after leaving the NHS, that we would be dealing with a global health pandemic on the scale of covid-19. It has permanently changed the way we look at and plan health and care services in the UK. In the London Borough of Sutton, where my constituency of Carshalton and Wallington is situated, 600 lives were tragically cut short due to covid-19. I am sure that that number would have been higher had it not been for the dedication, bravery and care of our local health and social care services.

I know that hon. Members across the House have the deepest gratitude and thanks for the unsung heroes. They were not just our doctors and nurses, but associated health professionals, pharmacists, volunteers and all those who stepped up to do their part. Part of the reason why I launched the Carshalton and Wallington unsung heroes scheme was to recognise their dedication. Unsurprisingly, our local health and care volunteers and staff featured heavily among the hundreds of nominations that I received. I cannot possibly name them all, but I would like to thank the St Helier Hospital eye treatment team; Reena, Sanja, Ravi and other local pharmacists; the head of occupational health at Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust; and of course the staff at vaccination centres across Carshalton and Wallington.

At the time of the outbreak of the pandemic, there was very little public discourse—understandably, as we were grappling with something that was unprecedented—about the long-term indirect impacts of the pandemic

[Elliot Colburn]

on our health and social care system. I know that I am not alone in receiving thousands and thousands of cases from constituents during the opening weeks of the pandemic and at its peak, when there were way too many incidences of people with long-term and pre-existing conditions experiencing disruption to their care. Many of them experienced much faster deterioration than would be usual or expected, and I hasten to add that it was through no fault of health and social care staff; it was simply because of the situation that we faced.

Some of the constituency cases that I heard of involved people with long-term cardiovascular problems who were unable to get treatment, spinal cord patients who were not able to be housed appropriately, and people with dementia and Alzheimer's who were cut off from the social interactions that were crucial to keeping their cognitive and communication skills alive. As an officer of the all-party parliamentary group on dementia and someone who has had personal experience of dementia in my family, I would like to focus on this area.

In the London Borough of Sutton there are over 2,400 people living with dementia. Based on recent trends, it is estimated that well over 3,000 residents over the age of 65 will be living with dementia by 2030—an increase of approximately 25% in a very short space of time. There are almost 1 million cases of dementia nationwide. People with dementia were badly hit by the pandemic, as indeed were many people with long-term conditions. Dementia was the most common pre-existing condition for people who died from covid-19: people with dementia accounted for more than a quarter of all covid-19 deaths in England and Wales during the first wave of the pandemic.

However, the effect of the pandemic on people living with dementia goes far beyond the statistics. Tragically, they have also seen accelerated progression of their conditions, for a number of reasons. We know that social contact is very important for people living with dementia, but it was of course restricted—again, for a very understandable reason. That has exacerbated the issues for people living with dementia. For people living in care homes, where more than 70% of residents have a form of dementia, the restrictions were particularly serious, given that the Office for National Statistics estimates that 97% of care homes were closed to visitors at one point.

People with many long-term conditions, including dementia, rely on rehabilitation services to maintain their skills and abilities. When provided with the right support, rehabilitation services can help people living with dementia to maintain their cognitive, social and emotional skills, as well as meeting their physical needs and any other related conditions. As mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst and the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), those services were not able to meet everyone's needs at the height of the pandemic. That was particularly true for people living with dementia, whose condition often makes it difficult for them to engage digitally, even if the service could be provided that way, which means that many people living with dementia have not been able to preserve their skills in the way that they could have done. That is exactly what happened to my constituent's mother who is living with dementia and saw a dramatic

deterioration during the first wave of the pandemic, suffering severe memory loss by the time she could meet her family again.

For those living with dementia, interaction with family is not just a nicety. It actually forms an integral and formal part of their care and treatment plan, as there is a causal link between lack of social interaction and the worsening of the condition. As we now emerge from restrictions and come out the other end of the pandemic, the long-term impact on the NHS, the care sector and people living with dementia will continue. I welcome the determination shown by the Department of Health and Social Care in dealing with the elective backlog. It is a mammoth task.

I also want to congratulate my own local NHS trust—Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust—for the work it has done. Previously, I welcomed the announcement of £500 million both to upgrade Epsom and St Helier hospitals and build another hospital in the London Borough of Sutton. I particularly want to applaud the trust's ingenuity. As soon as it realised the scale of the pandemic, it had the foresight to amend its plans for the development of the new hospital to ensure that it can future-proof itself against future pandemics.

I believe we need to see determination from the Department to deal with the backlog of deterioration that we have seen among those with long-term conditions. I join colleagues and the coalition of charities and organisations in support of that national rehabilitation strategy for everyone who has seen their long-term condition progress throughout the pandemic. If planned properly, the rehabilitation strategy is an opportunity to reduce pressure on other services in our health and social care system.

Colleagues will have heard plenty of examples of people in their constituencies ending up in hospital needing round-the-clock care for entirely avoidable reasons, such as a fall. If we help people maintain the skills they have, they will be less likely to require support from acute care. The Alzheimer's Society estimates that up to 65% of emergency admissions for people living with dementia could be avoided. Both rehabilitative and memory services are under significant pressure, and the waiting lists are still getting longer. That means that we need strategies to deal with the backlogs. With the right planning, we can not only overcome these issues but deliver better, more personalised support, because people living with dementia deserve nothing less.

2.17 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins, and I seem to be doing so regularly. I am pleased to participate in this debate. I want to thank the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) for bringing it forward and for setting the scene with the detail and information to help us participate. I am pleased to see the shadow spokesperson, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), and the Minister in their place.

We often parley in this Chamber. Indeed, the Minister, the two shadow spokespersons, myself and others here, including the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), are always willing to come to these debates. I am my party's spokesperson for health, so I am always pleased to speak in health debates. People may say that

I speak in every other debate, but that is by the way. If I am spared another hour, I will speak in the next debate as well. Members of Parliament in a small party find that they have more portfolios than most. I have got a lot of issues, and that is why my participation in debates is so frequent.

During the pandemic I repeatedly spoke about the impact on schoolchildren and those who were ill. My fears have unfortunately been realised. We have children with issues catching up on basic education. We have a raft of people who are undiagnosed or misdiagnosed, and treatable conditions have escalated. As the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) has done, I want to thank all health workers—doctors, GPs, pharmacists, nurses, care workers. I also want to thank family members, who gave up a lot of time to look after family members who were unwell. Pharmacists have also been mentioned, and it is important to place on the record our thanks to them. It is because of their industrious efforts that we have all been able to get to the other side of this pandemic.

I would also like to thank the Minister and the Government for what they have done. Covid and the vaccine roll-out enabled us to move toward what I always hoped we would see, and which the Prime Minister has been keen on—a normal life, where we do not react to covid but learn to live with it. That is where I want to be, and I believe it is where the people want to be as well.

There are those who suffer from long-term deteriorating health conditions who have not received the necessary treatment and care. In some areas, people will have had a poorer quality of life because of covid.

I am always reminded of one gentleman in particular, who is a minister of the church in Newtownards—we call him Pastor Mark. He took covid early on and is very fortunate to be in this world. He was ill for a long period of time. He is a young man with a wife and a young family. He suffers from long covid, the deteriorating effects of which are very clear to him. Today he does not have the stamina and energy that he once had. He tires easily. He refers to brain fog. I am not sure what that means, but I understand when he tells me. These are some of the repercussions of the pandemic. The sad fact is that covid has robbed us of so many, and we must rebuild where we can.

Some of those with severe health problems were in a queue to receive treatment. For some, delays were part of the reason for the numbers of those who passed away. I recall with sadness people I knew who were on a list to get an operation or a treatment. They were put to the back of the queue because of covid, and they are no longer here today. That operation is lost and the opportunity for treatment was not given. I cannot say that it would have prolonged those lives, but it would have given a better quality of life and would maybe have added a few years. We must think of all those people who were not able to get the help they needed.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington spoke about dementia. We had a debate on dementia in Westminster Hall some time ago. He is right. Probably because of my length of time as an elected representative, I know lots and lots of folk who, over the last period of time, have developed dementia and Alzheimer's. I see the detrimental effect on their wellbeing and on their

families—how dementia and Alzheimer's robs people of their quality of life and their knowledge of their family members.

A wee lady passed away just this week. Her daughter phoned me on Sunday and let me know. I have known her all my life—she was 94 or 95 when she passed away. She took dementia and she came home. Some things people do remember. One thing her daughter told me on Sunday was, “Jim, she bought the *Chronicle* every week”—that is our local paper—“and when she saw your picture, she knew it was you, though she might not have known that I was her daughter.” Some things rob people of the very core of their life, and that concerns me.

More than 150,000 had their lives cut short by the virus. As the Alzheimer's Society, Macmillan, Stroke Association, Age UK and many others have highlighted, across the UK, many people with pre-existing long-term health conditions have deteriorated faster than usual since the pandemic began. The increased rate of deterioration is due to the effects of having covid-19, as well as the measures taken to contain the virus, such as lockdown to reduce social contact and the suspension of rehabilitative services.

During the first wave of the pandemic, maybe professionals who provide rehabilitation were deployed to acute services for covid-19 patients. We understand the logic behind that, but there is an impact and there are side effects, which we are pointing to. Community rehabilitative services moved to primarily offer virtual support. As a result, rehabilitation services were unable to provide the same level of support that they did pre-covid. Community services are vital in helping to support people with long-term conditions. The mental wellbeing of those undergoing treatment for cancer, MS and heart conditions, and of disabled people, was greatly impacted, which gives us some cause for anxiety and concern.

The question for the Minister today, and for my Government, is where to go next. I support the aims of the organisations that produced “Moving forward stronger” and its specific recommendations, three of which I will cover in the timescale that you have indicated, Mrs Cummins. First,

“fully fund a national two-year rehabilitation strategy that ensures people with significantly deteriorated long-term conditions get the therapeutic support they need”.

That is really important. The second is to

“appoint a national clinical lead to implement this rehabilitation strategy”

and thirdly, to

“ensure local partners—such as local authorities and Integrated Care Systems...develop and deliver their own localised rehabilitation strategy, and that each ICS has a regional rehabilitation lead.”

When the Minister responds, I have every confidence that she will be able to reassure us that the things we are asking for today—collectively, but from different parts of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—will be addressed.

I know that the Minister has regular contact with the Minister back home—Robin Swann of the Northern Ireland Assembly. I think that is important. I am a great believer in the Union, not because I come from Northern Ireland and am a Unionist, but because I believe in the Union for England, for Wales, and—with great respect—for Scotland, with equal passion and concern. I would therefore ask the Minister what talks she has had with the Minister back at the Assembly.

[Jim Shannon]

I will give a quick plug for those who are waiting for cataract operations, and those who had glaucoma. Do you know what really annoys me, Mrs Cummins? It annoys me that some people have lost their eyesight because they have not had the care within the time when they should have had it. Maybe the Minister can give some reassurance on that.

I finish with this: these are things that I absolutely stand behind. I ask the Minister, to address the possible reasons why Government will not stand behind and implement the “Moving forward stronger” recommendations—although I hope that she will reassure me otherwise. We have people with a quality of life that can be improved with the right strategy, and the document lays a foundation to build on as we seek to repair that which has been decimated—through no fault of Government; it was covid-19 that did it. We are taking the approach that we must live with covid; those people have lived with the side effects it has had on their illnesses, and that cannot be allowed to continue. With that in mind, I very much look forward to the Minister’s response.

2.27 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Cummins. I, too, am grateful to the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) for leading this important debate for us today.

I will start with a quote from a doctor in my constituency of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill, who was working throughout the pandemic in University Hospital Monklands’ accident and emergency department. He told me:

“People are presenting with conditions that are unfortunately too severe for us to treat. Covid has caused appointments to be missed and regular health checks to be postponed. The simple loss in social contact with healthcare professionals has created a lasting impact that we are only just beginning to realise.”

Sadly, due to the pressures on our hard-working healthcare professionals and the measures required to prioritise resources towards those contracting covid-19, many of our regular NHS services have been paused or delayed. That disruption and continued backlog will indeed take time to be addressed fully—we know that—but our foremost thoughts must be on how we support our constituents whose long-term conditions continue to deteriorate.

Undoubtedly, the reality is that the greatest support package that any Government can give the sector is direct investment. I am proud to say that, once again, Scotland is showing the way, with the Scottish Government in Holyrood making the Scottish NHS the best-funded health service in the United Kingdom.

In February 2021, the former Health Secretary in Scotland, Jeane Freeman, announced a new community living change fund of £20 million to deliver and redesign a service for people living with long-term illness and complex needs, including intellectual disabilities and autism, and those enduring mental health problems. We know that there are many conditions that we could highlight, as the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) did in his opening remarks, and that there will be a legacy of mental health implications for us all to tackle in the wake of the pandemic.

That £20 million funding is the beginning of the Scottish Government’s implementation of the Feeley review—the independent review into social care in Scotland, which delivered many recommendations for the reform of social care in Scotland. The Scottish Government understands that we need not only to make up for what has been lost over the pandemic but to make healthcare provision even better than it ever has been before. We must ensure that nobody who is ill or suffering feels it best that they do not ever go to a hospital; we can never have a repeat of that.

The new Scottish Budget 2022-23 delivers record funding of £18 billion for the health and social care portfolio, which will be used to support the remobilisation of services, as well as delivery on the priorities relating to prevention and early intervention. This is a 20% increase in NHS frontline spending, which equates to £183 per person in Scotland and is 12% higher than the £163 of investment per person planned for England in the coming year. On top of that, the Scottish Government will of course abolish all dentistry charges, eye examination costs and non-residential social care charges for those in need of our support.

My question to the Minister is this: these are simple changes being made through targeted investment decisions, so where is the difficulty in applying such a scheme in England and Wales? The only answer that I can determine is that there is no such difficulty, and that there is simply a complete lack in prioritisation of the NHS and a lack of political will to safeguard the most precious resource that these four nations have to offer.

I had the privilege recently of witnessing another of the Scottish Government’s new schemes and strategies to achieve early diagnosis when I visited Mackie Pharmacy in my constituency. They are one of many pharmacies across Scotland that are taking part in a campaign to promote local pharmacies as the heart of first-contact healthcare services and provision. The development of this “pharmacy first” scheme will relieve the pressures on GP practices and on our accident and emergency departments, by allowing for the diagnosis and treatment of common ailments on a more localised basis.

In addition, the constant contact that our pharmacies have with our communities allows them to identify issues even before people themselves are aware of them. During my visit to Mackie Pharmacy, one assistant told me how she noticed that an elderly lady who regularly comes into the store was not her usual self. After a few exploratory questions about how the woman was feeling and then noticing some changes in her over the course of a few days, the pharmacist recommended an admission to hospital and it was found that she had a serious heart condition. That visit to the pharmacy that day saved that lady’s life. That is how prevention post-pandemic can and should happen. Schemes such as “pharmacy first” will play a vital role in helping us to better support those with long-term conditions.

The Scottish Government are caring for our elderly population in other ways as well, by delivering a new deal for our care sector. The independent Feeley review into social care in Scotland delivered many recommendations for reform. The review estimated that implementing its recommendations, including a national care service, would cost £660 million. The Scottish Government are going further, increasing social care investment by over 25% during this Parliament, which is equivalent to over £840 million.

Among the recommendations of the Feeley review are the creation of a national care service and the scrapping of non-residential social care charges, and we are going to deliver those things. While the UK Government delay, the SNP are taking action right now in Scotland to deliver a modern social care service that is fit for the 21st century. Why not match our ambition or our approach?

I believe that the crux of the matter is that the Government here in Westminster cannot be trusted with the protection of the NHS. How do we protect those who are deteriorating with long-term health conditions after the severest pandemic that this country has witnessed in recent history, when the Tories are geared towards creeping privatisation in England while forcing hard-working families to pay more in national insurance and income tax to access what healthcare remains public?

It must also be noted that even when England's healthcare provision is so reliant on immigrant workers, the Tories create a "hostile environment" in attempting to drive away the workers they rely on so much. Some workers in England have even left the NHS to work for multinational companies such as Amazon that pay their staff better than the NHS does and have better conditions. These facts speak for themselves.

While Scotland pushes forward with new ideas to deliver a health and social care service fit for the 21st century, the UK Government continue merely to paper over the cracks of their own mismanagement and continue to pursue policies in other areas that actively harm healthcare provision in these countries.

The pandemic is an opportunity for Governments all over the world to look again at the way that things have always been done. I sincerely hope that this UK Government will regard the pandemic as an opportunity finally to look after our NHS and all those in desperate need of its support.

2.34 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins.

I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), both on securing this debate through the Backbench Business Committee and on the powerful and detailed way he opened the debate today. I particularly thank him for sharing his and his wife's experiences of rehabilitation and recovery from a stroke.

The last two years have placed extraordinary pressures on our healthcare systems, social lives and livelihoods. To protect the NHS, we were forced to make unprecedented decisions and put in place measures to stem the tide of covid-19 infections. We are now in a far better position, and the vaccine roll-out has allowed us to reclaim the freedoms and liberties that we were forced to forgo. However, in the wake of the pandemic, we now face a new challenge—one that will impact the public health of the country for generations to come.

As Members from both sides of the Chamber have passionately conveyed, we face a crisis with long-term healthcare and deteriorating conditions. As health leaders have noted, during the pandemic many professionals who provide rehabilitation services were deployed to other acute services for covid-19 patients. That resulted in reduced support for those with long-term pre-existing

health conditions, and worse prognoses as a result. Examples of long-term conditions that have been particularly hard hit are included in the excellent "Moving forward stronger" report, which has been referenced by several Members.

The report, co-authored by charities and organisations including the Alzheimer's Society, the Stroke Association, Macmillan Cancer Support and Age UK, paints an incredibly stark picture of the current situation in long-term care and rehabilitation. The Alzheimer's Society outlines an almost 6% fall in dementia diagnosis rates. That puts individuals at risk of further deterioration, as reduced diagnosis ultimately results in reduced access to care. Diagnosis rates are also highlighted by Macmillan Cancer Support, which notes in the report that, as a direct result of the pandemic,

"there are more people being diagnosed at a later stage with more complex rehabilitation needs."

Diagnosis is just one part of the problem. Cancer waiting times have been in freefall since 2010 and have now reached record levels. When Labour left office, 80% of patients who received an urgent GP referral for suspected cancer were seen for their first treatment within 62 days, which is above the target. Under successive Conservative Governments since 2010, that figure has plummeted. The NHS performance standard of 85% has not been hit since 2014. Right now, almost 30% of patients are having to wait anxiously for longer than two months to be seen for suspected cancer that may or may not be spreading.

That trend is also made clear by the Stroke Association, which highlighted that in 2019-20 only 34% of stroke survivors received guideline levels of physiotherapy and that only 19% received the right amount of speech and language therapy. Is the Minister aware of these statistics, and what is her Department planning to do to address them? Make no mistake: ignoring rehabilitation and long-term care has a massive impact on patients and the NHS more broadly. If we do not provide people with the proper treatment as soon as they need it, they will rely on the health system more and more. Put simply, rehabilitation is preventative.

The "Moving forward stronger" report makes several clear recommendations to the Government. I would be grateful if the Minister gave an assessment of these in her response. In particular, I would be interested—as I am sure other Members would—to hear her thoughts on the recommendation to ensure that each integrated care system has a regional rehabilitation lead and that a national clinical lead is appointed to implement a national rehabilitation strategy.

I think there is a consensus across the Chamber that we need to get a grip on long-term health conditions and that these issues have probably been neglected for far too long. They had not been brought into such public view before covid-19 hit, but it is important that we work across parties to ensure that they are dealt with.

I want to touch on something that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned: long covid, which is something that I suffer with. Recent statistics show that there are now 1.5 million long covid sufferers in the UK, with over 685,000 people living with symptoms for more than a year. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that brain fog is not fun for a politician. Seeing the words, but not being confident that you have grabbed them and put them in the right order, is really quite debilitating and hits your confidence hard. I have struggled with it,

[Andrew Gwynne]

and I know many other people struggling with brain fog and other symptoms. I say to the Minister that the number of people with long covid is growing. Unless we urgently tackle the condition, I fear that we will face extraordinary pressures on our workforce and, indeed, on the healthcare system. Will she reassure long covid sufferers that her Department takes the condition seriously and will do everything it can to provide the requisite support and research to tackle it?

Finally, I want to focus on the mental health crisis, which is one of the issues to come out of the pandemic. There is no doubt that the lockdowns affected people's mental health. In England, an estimated 10 million people have additional mental health support needs as a direct consequence of the pandemic. Two thirds of them had pre-existing mental health conditions that have been worsened by the pandemic, so perhaps the Minister could tell us what action the Government are planning to take to help those people.

Mental health care in this country needs a real injection of both political vigour and resources. It needs urgent attention, and those who access treatment at the moment experience, on average, a three-and-a-half-year gap between the recognised onset of illness and the start of treatment. In order to provide some solutions, the next Labour Government will guarantee mental health treatment within a month for all who need it, as well as recruit 8,500 new staff so that 1 million extra people can access treatment every year by the end of our first term in office. This is an ambitious but wholly necessary plan, which will not only revolutionise care, but meaningfully address the impact of the pandemic on our nation's mental health.

I thank again the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst for the way that he introduced the debate, and I thank other Members for contributing to it. The one thing that comes out of this—it was a compelling case put by Member after Member—is that we need a proper strategy to reform long-term care in this country. We will support the Government in doing that, but we need action now.

2.43 pm

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan):

It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins, and to follow the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), who showed no symptoms of brain fog in his eloquent speech. He has my personal assurance that we will definitely focus on both research into long covid and its treatment.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) for raising this very important issue, and for his proud advocacy for patients with many different long-term conditions who rely on NHS services, particularly those who have had a stroke. I extend my best wishes to my hon. Friend's wife, Ann-Louise, who I am sure informed much of his powerful speech. Many of the experiences we have heard about will resonate with many of us. My father had a stroke a couple of years ago, and rehabilitation has been vital to his recovery, which is a long road that he is still on.

I was deeply moved to hear of the difficulties that the pandemic has caused people with deteriorating long-term conditions, many of which have been outlined. I want

to reassure all hon. Members that we remain committed to making sure that everyone has access to the care and support that they need and deserve. We know we have to catch up after the impact of the pandemic.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst mentioned spinal cord injury. I attended the all-party parliamentary group on spinal cord injury yesterday to hear about the concerns and the impact that the pandemic has had on people with the condition, and what more we need to do to respond to it.

We know that covid has had a significant impact on the health and care system, including on rehabilitation services. It has had a real and profound impact on people with rehabilitation needs and their treatment. I am very sorry for any undue suffering that that has caused. We remain committed to making sure that everyone has access to the care and support that they need and deserve. Throughout the pandemic, we have worked to maintain access to health services in what has been an extremely challenging environment, but we recognise that getting that support at the right time is vital for people's health. That is why we protected priority services across England during the pandemic, which included rehabilitation and post-acute services, for people who had survived a stroke, and their families and carers.

Continued service delivery was in part supported by innovative methods of care—we have talked about a few of them—throughout the pandemic. NHS England and Improvement supported people with long-term conditions by providing safe and person-centred assessments and diagnosis via remote methods, or in face-to-face consultations when appropriate. Providers innovated and rolled out remote consultations using video, telephone, email and text message services, and health services implemented new models of care with effective triage processes to make sure that patients received the care appropriate to them and in outpatient settings closer to home.

Clinical teams used and will continue to use virtual rehabilitation services alongside face-to-face contact to ensure that every patient gets the treatment and support that they need. Almost half of stroke survivors have received virtual care since the pandemic began, transforming their experience of the health system. Over 80% reported positive or very positive experiences, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst outlined, but we know that remote consultations are not suitable for everyone or for every situation, as eloquently outlined by the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who has experience in this matter. We will continue working to make sure services are suitably tailored to meet patients' often complex needs.

For example, NHSE&I has worked with memory assessment clinics to capture best practice on remote consultation and virtual diagnosis of dementia, which is vital, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn), to promote its use. It has published guidance to help enhance best practice in dementia assessment and diagnosis, and to support a personalised approach with choice over the delivery of remote consultation and diagnosis.

There has been further guidance for a range of conditions to help health systems adapt to the challenges of the pandemic, including the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidance on chronic obstructive

pulmonary disease and the Association of British Neurologists guidance to help healthcare professionals prioritise neurological services.

People with different long-term conditions may also need emotional and psychological support, as has been mentioned by many hon. Members, and that is why NHS mental health services stayed open throughout the pandemic, and why local areas continued to offer talking therapies—remotely in many cases—with a face-to-face option if appropriate. We are investing in a mental health recovery action plan, which will help us to provide more appointments, which, sadly, were missed during the pandemic. That will help us catch up.

We are committed to ensuring that those who need it are given outstanding and tailored care with choice, control and the support that they need to enable them to live independent lives, and we are committed to ensuring that people find adult social care fair and accessible. A lot of reforms are coming forward in this area. We recently introduced our strategy for the social care workforce in our “People at the Heart of Care” White Paper, which is supported by at least £500 million to develop and support the workforce over the next three years.

As highlighted by the “Moving forward stronger” report, rehabilitation services were particularly affected by the pandemic. The health system has long recognised the importance of rehabilitation. Many hon. Members mentioned how important that is to lifelong conditions and how important it is to enable people to avoid more acute illness later on, requiring more services from the health service. Specific commitments are set out in the long-term plan, which include the expansion of pulmonary rehabilitation services over 10 years from 2019, new and higher-intensity care models in respect of stroke rehabilitation, and the scaling up of cardiac rehabilitation to prevent up to 23,000 premature deaths.

Following the publication of the national stroke service model in May 2021, NHS England and NHS Improvement have committed to creating integrated stroke delivery networks across England, bringing together health and care services across the whole stroke pathway, from prevention to rehabilitation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst mentioned, linking those services is vital. More than 20 integrated stroke delivery networks are now operational, bringing together health and care services across the whole stroke pathway. Over £3.3 million has been dedicated to the establishment and ongoing delivery of those networks, which have already brought about some improvements to the co-ordination and direction of how the stroke care pathways across England are delivered.

The NHS is committed to delivering personalised, needs-based stroke rehabilitation to every stroke survivor who needs it, and we recognise the vital role of multidisciplinary teams, comprising occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and physiotherapists, in assessing, diagnosing and treating issues concerning different daily activities, speech and cognitive communication. Community rehabilitation services continue to benefit from extra investment, with £4.5 billion of investment in primary medical care and community health services by 2023-24 and productivity reforms set out in the long-term plan. The long-term plan committed to the rolling out by 2024 of new two-hour urgent community response and two-day reablement ambitions, which will improve the

responsiveness of community health services to people’s needs across the country. We anticipate that the wider package of investment in community and intermediate healthcare will eventually free more than 1 million hospital beds, allowing health systems to better support those in need.

Underlining our commitment to improving rehabilitation services, the NHS has created the new role of national director for hospital discharge and rehabilitation, which was rightly called for. Jenny Keane, who was appointed to the post in December 2021 and started recently, will lead a team of 60 people responsible for hospital discharge and rehabilitation. Her team within NHSE is already taking forward important work in this area, including a programme to identify the optimum bed-to-home model of care for non-acute rehabilitation services. That will support the implementation of the discharge-to-assess policy, and improve the delivery of timely and high-quality care in home settings. Ultimately, that will empower more people to recover and maintain their independence following an unplanned event or a period of acute care.

The programme will estimate the capacity for bedded non-acute rehabilitation care that integrated care systems will require for their populations. Systems will be supported to shift towards new rehabilitation models through a range of guidance, frameworks and tools. I anticipate that rehabilitation will also benefit from the wider reforms set out in the Health and Care Bill, reorienting systems towards co-operation and strengthening NHS action to reduce health inequalities. Rehabilitation will also benefit from the plans that we have set out in the integration White Paper, under which patients will receive better, more joined-up care.

Looking ahead, the NHS published its delivery plan for tackling the covid-19 backlog of elective care last month. The plan sets out a clear vision for how the NHS will recover and expand elective services over the next three years, including how it will support patients. We plan to spend more than £8 billion between the next financial year and 2024-25. That is in addition to the £2 billion elective recovery fund and £700 million targeted investment fund already made available to systems this year to help to drive up and protect elective activity. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst is right that we must ensure that the voice of rehabilitation services does not get lost in that considerable investment.

That funding could deliver the equivalent of around 9 million more checks, scans and procedures, and it will mean that the NHS in England can aim to deliver around 30% more elective activity by 2024-25 than it was delivering before the pandemic. A significant part of that funding will be invested in staff, in terms of both capacity and skills. The delivery plan also contains some targets to ensure that by March 2025 people will not wait longer than a year for elective care.

Jim Shannon: I am finding the Minister’s response very helpful and supportive of what we are trying to do, but I asked a specific question in relation to those who are waiting for eyesight-saving operations. We need to ensure that they do not lose their eyesight because of the delays. If the Minister is able to give me a response today, that will be great, but if she cannot, I am happy for all of us to receive a response by letter.

Gillian Keegan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and I am very happy to respond by letter. However, I do know—I have had conversations about it—that these prioritised electives will be prioritised. Somebody whose sight can be saved through an operation would, I imagine, be a key priority for our NHS colleagues.

At the October 2021 spending review, the Government announced a further £5.9 billion of capital funding to support elective recovery, diagnostics and technology. That funding will drive investment in technology to improve patient experiences of care and help patients manage their experience.

The NHS has been working on rolling out 44 community diagnostic centres, which will massively increase diagnostic activity. As we take the road to recovery, we are also reforming and transforming how care and health services are delivered for patients, including through dedicated surgical hubs and more convenient and efficient community diagnostic centres.

Finally, I want to thank hon. Members for the points that they have made in the debate.

Sir Robert Neill: I am very grateful for the Minister's detailed response and for her commitment to trying to improve these matters. She referred to a delivery plan for recovery of elective services, but is not the logical thing to ensure that the voice of those with long-term needs and of rehabilitation is not lost, and that we also have a specific delivery plan for rehabilitation and for catching up on the backlog? I did not hear mention of that. Are we going to have that?

Gillian Keegan: I mentioned the work that Jenny Keane will be doing following her recent appointment. She will be responsible for work on rehabilitation and discharges, as well as other areas covered by NHS continuing healthcare and the better care fund. That work is ongoing but does not include a specific commitment at this point to a strategy, as outlined.

Sir Robert Neill: Can the Minister tell me why not?

Gillian Keegan: I think it is only fair to say that, obviously, Jenny Keane has just started her work in this area—it is very new—but I know that she will be

dedicated to ensuring that we make progress on the plans that I have set out. I hope that they reassure hon. Members that we will continue to support people who are living with long-term conditions and, by learning the lessons from the pandemic, ensure that they have access to the right services, at the right time, to enable them to live the fullest and happiest life they can. A lot of work is ongoing. We need to get behind that work and, obviously, support the team who are looking to deliver it. I thank everybody very much for their contributions.

2.58 pm

Sir Robert Neill: I am very grateful to all those who participated in this debate, from both the Front and Back Benches, for the tone of the debate and their contributions. I particularly appreciated hearing about the personal experience of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). All of us bring our experiences to bear on these matters, and that is hugely important.

I welcome the Minister's commitment—I do not doubt it—politically and personally. I am glad that we have a director in place. May I just gently say that perhaps the first task that the director should be given is actually to produce a strategy? A number of excellent initiatives have been referred to, but we need something to pull them all together and join them up. The Minister knows as well as I do that the way government works is that if we do not have something that gives us a proper framework and a proper set of measures to deliver on and something to hold people's feet to the fire with—even for those with the best of intentions—things do get lost, so I urge her to take away that message. With the director, one part of the solution has been put in place, but we need a framework and a strategy for that director to work to. I am sure that many of us here today will happily work with the Minister, her officials and the NHS to help to deliver that. But I hope that she will not think that that is enough—there is still more to do.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered people with deteriorating long-term health conditions during the covid-19 pandemic.

Covid-19: NHS Support for Prostate Cancer Patients

[SIOBHAIN McDONAGH *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered NHS support for prostate cancer patients after the covid-19 pandemic.

Ms McDonagh, as your constituency neighbour, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time in Westminster Hall. I extend my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for such an important debate. I also thank the many Carshalton and Wallington residents who came forward to share their experiences of prostate cancer, either having had it themselves or having supported a loved one or friend through it.

Many people in this room and many of those watching will know a male relative or have a friend in their life who has had prostate cancer. I hope this important debate will raise awareness of the need to get yourself checked. There will be many striking statistics mentioned in the debate that will concern Members present, but I am keen to begin with a positive. Cancer survival rates in the United Kingdom have never been higher. Survival rates have improved each year since 2010. Prostate cancer survival has tripled in the past 40 years, with 85% of men surviving for five years or longer. However, the covid-19 pandemic threatens to derail this progress through a decrease in diagnostics, especially for men over the age of 50.

There are over 47,000 new prostate cancer cases every single year, with a man dying every 45 minutes from the condition. Early diagnosis is the key to fighting this disease. The pandemic has resulted in fewer men coming to their GP to get tested for prostate cancer, with the “stay at home” messaging particularly deterring older men, who are most at risk from prostate cancer, from coming forward. While the referral rate for prostate cancer has recovered to 80% of pre-pandemic levels, it still lags behind those for other forms of cancer, such as breast cancer, which is operating at 120% of pre-pandemic levels.

Stark figures from the charity Prostate Cancer UK reveal that there have been 50,000 fewer referrals for suspected prostate cancer patients than the usual trends would predict. The impact of that is incredibly worrying. Some 14,000 fewer men in the UK started treatment for prostate cancer between April 2020 and December 2021 compared with the equivalent months prior to the pandemic. That means that 14,000 men are living without the knowledge that they have the condition, and it means that 14,000 men have not yet started that all-important treatment plan.

Prostate Cancer UK has warned that, because of that, 3,500 men risk being diagnosed with late-stage prostate cancer. I cannot stress enough the importance of people getting themselves checked if they have symptoms or if they fall into the high-risk categories. Those include men over the age of 50, black African and black Caribbean men, and men with a father or brother who have had prostate cancer.

Sadly, the statistics and anecdotes that many of us will have heard point to the fact that men are far less willing to get themselves checked. Whether that is out of embarrassment or fear, getting diagnosed early can make an enormous difference to survival rates; five-year survival rates for men who are diagnosed with prostate cancer between stages 1 and 3 are over 95%. There are fantastic NHS campaigns, such as the “Help Us Help You” campaign, which has urged people with potential cancer symptoms to come forward for life-saving checks. The second stage of that campaign addresses the fear that often comes with booking the first appointment. Despite the fantastic work that is already being carried out, I hope that the Minister will be able to enlighten us about what more the Government are doing to destigmatise men coming forward to check their symptoms.

While being checked for prostate cancer is important for all men, it is especially important for men of black African or black Caribbean origin. I was taken aback to learn that, while one in eight of all men will get the disease, one in four black men will be diagnosed with prostate cancer in their lifetime; black men are also far more likely to be diagnosed with a more aggressive type. People from black and ethnic minority groups are also 4% less likely to receive radical treatment than people from white ethnic groups.

Through covid-19, we have seen what we can achieve when we work together. Last year, I was proud to host a roundtable in Carshalton and Wallington in collaboration with the NHS, the third sector and community groups to encourage ethnic minority communities to come forward and get the jab. The roundtable was well attended and demonstrated what we could achieve in prostate cancer diagnostics if the Government worked closely with the third sector and community groups to spread awareness.

However, improving awareness requires a corresponding increase in imaging capacity. Imaging services such as multiparametric MRI are critical to achieving earlier diagnoses, which, as I stated earlier, is key to survival. MpMRI scans can confirm or rule out prostate cancer in an accurate and timely manner, reducing the stressful wait for patients and their families. From speaking with cancer charities, I know that the significant variation in access to mpMRI provision is concerning. If we are to bring prostate cancer diagnoses back to pre-pandemic levels—and, indeed, increase them—we must address that postcode lottery. MpMRI provision must, as a minimum, be expanded in line with growth rates prior to the pandemic if we are to get diagnoses back to pre-pandemic levels. The 10-year cancer plan provides a golden opportunity to address this issue.

I have already mentioned the negative impact the pandemic has had on the prostate cancer community, but I am keen to highlight some positives that could be considered in a post-pandemic setting. Prostate Cancer UK has noted that the policy change during the pandemic to grant special access to certain covid-friendly novel hormone therapies for patients was very warmly welcomed by the community. This policy change has been wanted for some time, and it not only kept patients safe at home during the pandemic but improved their care experience, as they spent less time in hospital. Along with the increased interaction between patients and clinicians using technology, the change has made for higher levels of patient satisfaction and experience.

[Elliot Colburn]

I look forward to seeing greater access to diagnosis and treatment and increased use of technology in my constituency at the London cancer hub, an exceptionally exciting project in the London Borough of Sutton. As a former employee, the Minister will know the Royal Marsden Hospital very well. I will not go over ground that she already knows, as cancer nurse who, I believe, is still practising.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield) *indicated assent.*

Elliot Colburn: The Minister is nodding. The Royal Marsden and the Institute of Cancer Research already form one of the leading cancer research and treatment centres in the world. The development plans for the London cancer hub will double the capacity for cancer research on the site, making the United Kingdom second only to the United States. It will be a game changer and will take our cancer research to the next level. It is a prime opportunity to ensure that the reduction in prostate cancer diagnoses remains a temporary blip in the overall effort to achieve early diagnosis for everyone with the condition.

This effort must include the cancer workforce. The Government have already invested money to address the cancer backlog, but the workforce issue must also be addressed. Patients with prostate cancer and their families go through one of the most difficult things in life to navigate. They are desperate for more clinical nurse specialists, who provide holistic, patient-centred care, with the empathy needed in these very dark times. Having access to clinical nurse specialists means that prostate cancer patients are far more likely to be positive about their care and treatment and to receive more individualised treatment plans.

One suggestion to be considered for the post-pandemic NHS is non-medical practitioner-led prostate cancer clinics. Such clinics would not only enhance the clinical pathways in prostate cancer, but relieve time burdens on oncologists and help to reduce costs that can be cycled back into the system. With one in four consultant clinical oncologists reporting risk of burnout, and with covid-19 exacerbating those issues over the past two years, investing in non-medical practitioners or increasing the number of clinical nurse specialists—or both—could be solutions to workforce concerns. I urge the Government to work with NHS England, Health Education England and the devolved Administrations to ensure that professional working groups in the prostate cancer workforce are addressing the workforce backlogs, including with clear training routes for healthcare professionals wishing to upskill.

I appreciate that there is strong interest in the debate, so I am keen to conclude my remarks. If the Minister takes anything away, I hope it is the need to find those 14,000 men missing from the prostate cancer treatment pathway, and to ensure that workforce issues are looked at by the Government. The pandemic has provided the NHS with a unique opportunity to rethink how we provide care not just to prostate cancer patients but to all cancer patients, with greater use of technology and the benefits of covid-friendly treatments that patients have had access to throughout the pandemic.

Finally, the one message that I hope those watching the debate—especially those in high-risk categories—will take away from it is: “Please get yourself checked”. The support available for patients and their families is fantastic, and it is out there. I say to people watching: “You are never alone”. I urge them to book that vital first appointment. I look forward to hearing the contributions from other hon. Members on this incredibly important issue.

3.11 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh, and to make a contribution on this issue as my party’s health spokesperson. I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for setting the scene so well, as he always does, and for being so relatable.

I did a quick head count earlier. There are nine men in this room and the fact is that one in six of us—possibly two of us—will succumb to prostate cancer. That being the case, the effect of prostate cancer really hits home. I am also pleased to see the Minister in her place and recognise her contribution not just as a Minister but in the NHS, as the hon. Gentleman referred to. I am pleased to be alongside my colleague and friend, the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar), who is the shadow health spokesperson for the Scottish National party. It is also nice to see the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark) in her place, and I look forward to her contribution.

As I have mentioned many times, the pandemic has had a significant impact on all aspects of life, but undoubtedly on our health service. As my party’s health spokesperson, it is great to be here to talk about what further steps we can take to support those who suffer with prostate cancer.

I want to quickly tell a story, because nothing illustrates the case better than a story. I have a very good friend. I am not going to give his name or say where he works, but we would work closely every week of my life. I always phone him and seven or eight weeks ago, I asked him how he was and he said to me, “I just went to get a wee health check to see how I was. They tell me I’ve got prostate cancer.” I said, “I hope it all works out.” He waited for the tests to come back, and the test was positive. They did not hang about. Within two weeks he had the operation. The NHS in Northern Ireland, where it is a devolved matter, paid for his operation and he went to Dublin to get it done. He did not realise that that check to see if everything was all right would lead to a prostate cancer operation, but that early diagnosis means that he is able to have same normality of life as everybody in this Chamber.

That illustrates the issue raised by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington said. We have to put in place a prostate cancer strategy or plan for, as the hon. Gentleman said, men of a certain age—and I am one of them, by the way. It is not for me to comment on people’s age, but a few others present may also qualify.

Prostate cancer is the most common cancer for men, with over 47,000 new cases every year. Even prior to the pandemic, challenges in delivering the highest quality of care for patients had increased. It was exacerbated by staff shortages, inadequate care pathways and limited access to effective diagnosis. That is what we have to

address. I know the Minister recognises the need for early diagnosis on any condition, but today's debate is about prostate cancer. One in six men in the UK will be diagnosed with prostate cancer. It accounts for 27% of all new male cancer patients in the UK. That gives Members an idea of the size of the subject matter and why it is so important to debate it.

I always want to give a Northern Ireland perspective in debates, because we are part of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and what happens in Northern Ireland is replicated here. Our population is only 1.8 million, but we can none the less illustrate the issue. In Northern Ireland, 1,100 men are diagnosed with prostate cancer every year, with sadly 276 of those on average losing their lives to the disease. That is a large number—26% or 27% of those with prostate cancer unfortunately do not make it. Whether this is due to late diagnosis owing to the pandemic or to men downplaying their symptoms as they feel that there are more important things to deal with, we must encourage and raise awareness of the importance of checking for prostate cancer.

Speaking as a man, I know that those watching and present in the Chamber will know that there is no cold as bad as a man's cold. But when somebody tells us to go to the doctor, we say, "No, I won't." If we are asked to go to the doctor, we put it off because we do not want to bother them. We say, "It's not that bad really. I was exaggerating a wee bit. I think I'll be alright." That is our attitude. How do we change that attitude? We cannot do it by raising awareness alone. Perhaps one way of addressing it is by highlighting the brutal facts of how prostate cancer is taking people out of society. Perhaps we need to shock men into responding.

I have been in contact with Prostate Cancer UK, which has highlighted the troubles faced during the pandemic. First, reduced access to MRIs as a result of covid impacted on the ability of the NHS to diagnose prostate cancer, and there has been significant variation in the provision of services. How are the Government addressing the issue of early diagnosis and of access to MRI scans and biopsies to check it out? Crucially, what impact did the "Stay at Home" message have on people in need of diagnosis?

The pandemic has had many detrimental effects on society, one of which is people getting used to not seeing others. They are not going out in the way that they did in the past. We have to address that. In particular, older men, who are in a higher risk group for covid, were less likely to visit their GP and more likely to downplay their symptoms. Could the Minister give an indication of how we can address that?

Workforce issues and staff shortages were already significant before covid, with a growing shortage of oncologists and workforce burnout exacerbating the challenges faced by healthcare professionals in providing high-quality care. NHS England has been working with cancer alliances to ensure that improvements made during the pandemic are retained and improved further. I urge the Minister to have conversations—I know that he already does this—with our counterparts in the devolved nations to ensure that no man, nobody, is left behind by health provisions across the United Kingdom.

Education also plays a crucial role in health improvement. It should provide clear and simple messaging to educate men who are at risk of prostate cancer about the potential

impact of diagnosis. Do we advertise that on TV, or are there more adverts in the press? It is advertised in my surgery in Kircubbin; I suspect that the same is true of everybody's surgery. I do not go to the doctor very often, except for my diabetes check-ups. Perhaps the messaging is not getting to the people it needs to get to. How do we do that better?

Prostate Cancer UK has shared an online 30-second risk checker, which is very helpful for men across the United Kingdom. They can enter basic details and assess the risk that they face. That involves men taking a minute out of their day, and the online tool will direct them in the right way.

I will draw to a finish, as I am conscious that others wish to speak. The pandemic has had a significant impact on all aspects of life and disrupted the provision of routine care, forcing providers and patients to postpone many services and to adopt virtual consultations. I can almost feel my blood drain when I hear the term "virtual consultations", because people need to see their doctor face to face. This has highlighted the need for face-to-face appointments in order to embrace and enhance the services that our NHS provides.

For too long, cancer patients have felt let down by the prioritisation of covid. Today's debate gives us a chance to address the issue. I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington for securing the debate, and I look forward to the Minister's response. I am never disappointed with her responses. I know that she understands the issues and we look forward to her answers.

3.20 pm

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) on securing the debate, and I thank Prostate Cancer UK for our wonderful badges and for all the work it does. It is an honour to speak in the debate, and I note that March is both Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month and Prostate Cancer Awareness Month.

I would like to start by stating that we have no men's health strategy in this country, but we should do. I refer to the great work done by the all-party parliamentary group on issues affecting men and boys, which I have the honour of chairing. To date, we have issued two reports that show the need for a men's health strategy, which would provide an overarching and joined-up plan to end the gender age gap. That is desperately needed in the UK, where one in five men will die before their retirement. One man commits suicide every 2 hours, and 86% of homeless people are men. Some 95% of prisoners are men, and 97% of fatal accidents at work happen to men. These are appalling statistics.

Far worse than the awful numbers is the sobering fact that 30 men die every day from prostate cancer, which amounts to 11,900 deaths a year. Let me explain what those numbers mean. There are 430 male MPs in this House, out of a total of 650 Members. Some 16.7% of all men will get prostate cancer, which means that 71 male Members of the House will get it. That is more than 11% of all Members—more than one in 10 of us.

Many deaths could be avoided if we had a prostate screening programme. The UK has a policy that we do not need to have a national screening policy for men to

[Nick Fletcher]

check whether they have prostate cancer. Until now, the NHS has taken the view that screening for prostate cancer would not meet the national and international criteria laid down for a viable and valuable screening programme. Instead, the NHS adopts a wait-and-see policy. However, medical science has progressed, and the historical objections are no longer valid.

The data shows that the age of 50 onwards is the danger zone for men. Only four cases of prostate cancer per 100,000 happen in men aged 40 to 44, but the figure rises to 6,285 for men aged 60 to 64. Men between 50 and 80 are most at risk. The data shows beyond doubt that a man of African heritage is twice as likely as a Caucasian male to contract prostate cancer. Research from 1995 showed a drop of 44% in mortality over 14 years when screening takes place, and another trial showed a reduction of 21%. Whichever figure we take, it is a staggering number of lives that could have been saved—2,000 lives or more every year.

The issue has been the effectiveness of screening and the cost, but medical science has moved on. A simple prostate-specific antigen blood test is inexpensive, costing literally pennies, and it will help to identify high antigen counts so that we know who is most at risk. These men can then be monitored and retested after a further three months. The relatively few men who still have a high number of antigens can then be given an MRI scan to confirm beyond doubt whether they have prostate cancer or not. Those who are diagnosed can then be treated, thousands of lives will be saved, and thousands of lives will be longer and will be quality lives.

Does screening work? The current breast cancer screening programme is believed to save 1,300 lives a year. Around 2,600 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer each year and 690 women die of it each year. It is estimated that 83% of cervical cancer cases would be avoided if all women used the cervical cancer screening programme. Screening works well for breast cancer and cervical cancer. It is proven to work. So why do we not have a screening programme for prostate cancer?

Implementation of a prostate cancer screening programme would obviously be beneficial for the men involved, but it would also be beneficial for their family, their friends and the country at large. Early diagnosis will save the economy money, as it will enable those affected to continue working rather than being dependent on the welfare state. It saves the NHS money in avoiding the expensive treatments that would be needed for advanced cancer. Wives will not lose their husbands, children will not lose their fathers, and friends and other loved ones will not be emotionally scarred by grief.

What can be said against introducing a national screening programme for all men between the ages of 50 and 80? The criteria for a screening programme have been met: it would extend many thousands of lives; it would save the NHS money; prevention is better than cure; and it causes no harm, instead providing a real benefit at a reasonable cost.

I have two asks today: can we seriously consider putting in place both a national prostate screening programme and a men's health strategy? These initiatives will save money, but much more importantly they will save lives.

3.26 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair today, Ms McDonagh. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing this vital debate on a subject that unfortunately does not receive the attention that it deserves.

For a long time, prostate cancer has been wrongly labelled an old man's disease. In fact, all men are at risk of developing prostate cancer at any age, with one in six of us facing a diagnosis in our lifetimes, and we have also heard that it has a disproportionate effect on black African and Caribbean men. Yet there is still a lack of awareness of this disease—awareness that is needed to support affected men. That was particularly true during the pandemic, which has seen our healthcare provision being put under great and unprecedented pressure.

The earlier prostate cancer is found, the better the chance of a good outcome. Analysis by Prostate Cancer UK suggests that between April 2020 and September 2021, 600 fewer prostate cancer diagnoses were confirmed in Scotland. Prostate Cancer UK estimates that, because of the pandemic, 14,000 men across Scotland and the rest of the UK have not yet started treatment for prostate cancer.

Just a couple of weeks ago, Prostate Cancer UK launched a UK-wide campaign alongside the NHS to find those 14,000 missing men, and we in the Scottish National party welcome this initiative. Throughout the covid-19 pandemic, cancer has remained a Scottish Government priority, and the Scottish Government are focused on ensuring that patients are diagnosed and treated as quickly as possible. Scotland has 76 general practitioners per 100,000 citizens, compared with a UK average of 60 GPs per 100,000 citizens. That has undoubtedly helped to improve early detection of cancer in Scotland, and I am sure that right hon. and hon. Members will agree that GP provision—or a lack of it, in many respects—is hugely impactful in the wider healthcare arena.

Throughout the ongoing health crisis, the First Minister of Scotland has persistently stressed that the NHS remains available for those who need it. Advice has been sent to all cancer services in Scotland, including the key message that boards are expected to maintain full urgent cancer services. Indeed, most cancer treatment continued throughout lockdown; even at the height of the pandemic, patients in Scotland waited on average just two days before starting treatment. Regrettably, I understand that that was not the case in England or Wales.

The impact of this decision in Scotland undoubtedly saved the life of one of my constituents in Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill. After feeling unwell and explaining their symptoms to the NHS 24 helpline, they were quickly admitted to hospital, with specialist cancer treatment and support to hand. However, the only available treatment option that could be offered was invasive surgery, bringing with it, of course, a longer recovery time and more risk compared with a keyhole surgery procedure. None the less, that early diagnosis proved to be critical.

In order to ensure that this does not spiral into a secondary health crisis, a large amount of investment will be needed to clear the backlog of screening and

treatments, to get cancer services back operating at the level that they were before the pandemic. We should actually be aiming to make them even better. The Scottish Government continue to engage with the cancer community to ensure that all key partners involved in the delivery of the national cancer recovery plan, which will support cancer patients to have equitable access to care regardless of where they live, improve patients' experience of care and roll out innovative treatments to improve cancer services.

To improve cancer performance over the next five years, the Scottish Government are taking a range of actions, including ensuring that everyone across Scotland who meets referral criteria has access to an early cancer diagnostic centre, and investing £40 million to support cancer services and improve cancer waiting times, with a focus on the most challenged cancer pathways, including neurology, colorectal and breast cancer. Of that, £20 million will support the Detect Cancer Early programme, providing greater public awareness of signs and symptoms of cancer and supporting the development of optimal cancer pathways to improve earlier diagnosis routes. We are also supporting a rehabilitation programme for cancer patients, to ensure the best possible preparation for treatment and improve both the experience of treatment and its clinical outcomes. That is what a Government with their priorities in the right place look like.

The UK Government must begin to invest properly in the NHS in England. That, of course, will ensure that adequate consequential are delivered to Scotland to enable us to recover from the pandemic. Those improvements should be funded through efficient decision-making, strategy and budgeting, not by raising national insurance, which threatens to hit those on the lowest incomes in the midst of the cost of living crisis. They are the very people who are most likely to rely on the services of our NHS, so they are facing quite the double-edged sword. I urge the Minister and the Government to take a leaf out of our book in Scotland and take the necessary steps to safeguard the prospects of prostate cancer patients in the light of the pandemic, and for generations to come.

I reiterate the comments of the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, and I urge all men to go and get that check. That moment of discomfort and embarrassment may just be the moment that saves your life.

3.32 pm

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing this important debate, and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) and for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) for their excellent contributions.

The pandemic has had an impact on every aspect of our lives—the people we see, the services we use, and the support that we seek in times of need. While that is the case for all of us, it is particularly true for prostate cancer patients. On a number of occasions in recent months, we have heard Members on both sides of the House speak about the impact of the pandemic on cancer care and the continually growing backlog. However, this

situation was not inevitable. It is right that we acknowledge the serious impact of the pandemic across our NHS and the challenges that it has presented; however, we entered the pandemic in a very vulnerable position. After a decade of the Government's mismanagement, the NHS went into the covid crisis with a record waiting list and a staff shortage of 100,000. It is not just that the Tories did not fix the roof when the sun was shining; they dismantled the roof and removed the floorboards.

The Government blame covid, but the reality is that performance was declining for years before the virus hit. Access to treatment within 62 days of an urgent referral for urological cancer was at 70.6% in March 2020, down from 84% in 2010 when Labour left office. Now, despite the tireless work of NHS staff, performance against targets has hit a record low. More people than ever before are facing unacceptably long waits for vital cancer tests and treatment. I hope that the Minister agrees that the situation is simply unacceptable. Will she tell me exactly what is being done to address that?

We have heard the Secretary of State launch a call for evidence, but does he really think that after 12 years in power, more talk is good enough? Speed of treatment is critical to cancer patients. When every day, hour and minute counts, prostate cancer patients cannot afford to wait for the Government to consult and consider, looking to the sector for answers, because they have none themselves. Prostate cancer patients need firm action now, not another kick of the can down the road—that is rapidly becoming this Government's trademark.

As other Members have done throughout the debate, I pay tribute to the brilliant work of Prostate Cancer UK. I am proud to support its campaign to identify 14,000 men who are absent from the prostate cancer treatment pathway because of the pandemic. Such campaigns are vital in raising awareness, and the 400,000 men who subsequently checked their risk of prostate cancer is testament to that. I welcome the investment that the Government made in the campaign, and I am keen to hear from the Minister what plans they have to continue that.

Those campaigns make a real difference, so it is important that the Government recognise the need for further development in the relationship between the NHS and the relevant charities. Awareness is just one part of the action that we need to take on prostate cancer, and much more needs to be done to improve the patient journey beyond the initial stage.

A clear and accessible diagnosis process is vital to ensure that patients can access the treatment they need in a timely manner. Diagnosis rates have continued to fluctuate for a number of years and, despite peaking in 2018, they made a noticeable drop in 2019, before the start of the pandemic. Given the problems that the pandemic has caused in accessing primary care services, I am keen to hear from the Minister what understanding the Government have of where we are now on diagnosis rates.

I have spoken to several stakeholders across the cancer sector, and they are concerned that many post-pandemic diagnoses will, sadly, be of later stage cancers. I therefore look forward to the Minister outlining the steps that the Government will take to ensure that awareness campaigns are not stunted by inaccessible diagnosis pathways, putting patients' outcomes at risk.

[Feryal Clark]

As other Members and I have mentioned, referrals are one area in which prostate cancer lags behind other cancers. The Secretary of State acknowledged that himself when launching his elective recovery plan, reaffirming his commitment to get back on track with referral targets, and yet there is absolutely nothing of merit in that plan to reassure prostate cancer patients.

The Secretary of State masks his complete lack of action with grand and frankly unhelpful language when he talks about launching a “war on cancer”. Such words, far from making the Secretary of State look strong, show a gross disrespect for patients and set a dangerous precedent. I urge him and all Ministers to think about the implications of their language for people living with prostate cancer—with all cancers—and the impact that such language can have on them.

One element underpinning all the issues outlined in the debate is workforce, which other Members have mentioned. The existing prostate cancer workforce is overstretched, with prostate cancer specialist nurses having a caseload more than three times higher than that of nurses covering breast cancer. Without a robust workforce strategy, our NHS will simply not be in a place to provide the support that prostate cancer patients need as we emerge from the pandemic, and beyond, but Ministers continue to bury their heads in the sand. They have failed to bring forward a long-term workforce strategy, and with weeks to go until the end of the financial year, there is still no clarity on Health Education England’s budget. In fact, all the Secretary of State can say is that the NHS has to find money from existing budgets to address the workforce shortage. That is really unhelpful. Does the Minister really think that is good enough?

I want to take this opportunity to praise the work of colleagues in the other place in championing workforce issues in their consideration of the Health and Care Bill. I welcome Baroness Cumberlege’s amendment to the Bill to require the regular publication of health and care workforce projections. Will the Minister take this opportunity to reassure us that the amendment will not be overturned when the Bill comes to the Floor of the House? I look forward to working with Members across the House to keep the workforce issue at the forefront, ensuring that prostate cancer patients and others have the support that they need.

I am keen to hear from the Minister what plans the Government have to ensure that staff are trained and retained in a sustainable way so that prostate cancer patients can always access care. People living with prostate cancer need an NHS that has the time and resources to support them as we emerge from the pandemic. It is about time the Government delivered on that.

3.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. May I start by declaring an interest? I still work, as my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) said, as a cancer nurse. I was slightly disappointed by the tone of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark). I did

not want to be political but, for the record, I got into politics because, as a cancer nurse, I was so frustrated with the previous Labour Government’s target-driven approach, which looked good on paper, but in reality did not make a huge difference to patients.

I welcome this debate that was secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington. Prostate cancer absolutely deserves a debate that focuses on the key issues that he described so well. I want to reassure colleagues that cancer treatments and diagnosis have remained a top priority throughout the pandemic—one of the few areas of healthcare where much of it stayed open—with over 330,000 urgent referrals and more than 170,000 treatments for urological cancers between March 2020 and December last year.

I want to thank the amazing work of NHS staff up and down the country who maintained cancer treatment levels at 94%, which is an astonishing record when they had to deal with covid in the workforce and patients undergoing prostate treatment also coming through covid, too. Although treatment levels remained very high during the pandemic, there is no doubt that referrals suffered. We asked men and women to stay away from the NHS to protect it during that time and we saw a huge drop-off in referrals. It is estimated that up to 32,000 fewer people than expected have started cancer treatment because of that, but we are seeing a change with record levels of referrals coming through the system right now. Last month’s figure was around 11,000 cancer referrals a day.

Although people stayed away during the pandemic, they are coming back in their droves now, and the ambition is to try to get as many of those diagnosed as quickly as possible and into treatment. We are trying to get prostate cancer in particular diagnosed as quickly as possible by implementing best practice timed pathways for prostate cancer, including the use of mpMRI, which my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington mentioned. It captures images of the prostate in a much better way than the standard MRI does, so that is a focus and we have seen a major uptake in that. Back in 2016, only 335 people were going through that system, but by 2020 that had gone up to 11,000 people. We are seeing a real shift in the use of that technology, which better diagnoses men with prostate cancer.

Partnering with Prostate Cancer UK, we are delivering a cancer risk-awareness campaign, which started in February and will continue to run until the end of this month. As a number of colleagues have said, we must raise awareness about the symptoms of prostate cancer and encourage men to come forward.

Although I do not wish to generalise, I take the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) and by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about the differences in how men and women face health issues. When women have an issue, they will come forward, although they often feel as if they are not being heard and that there is a delay in accessing healthcare. Men are slightly different in that often they will not come forward in the first place, so the campaigns let them know about the symptoms, encourage them come forward and reassure them that diagnosis and treatment will happen relatively quickly.

The outcome is good for many men with prostate cancer, but we encourage people to come forward quickly because the prognosis is improved the earlier they can

get involved in treatment, and the treatment is often less invasive. There are good reasons to encourage men to come forward.

The purpose of our campaign is to educate people about their risk of prostate cancer. As we have heard, some people are more at risk than others. As a cancer that does not present with many symptoms, particularly at an early stage, it is vital to encourage those at risk to discuss that with their GP and have a prostate-specific antigen test. To address the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley, gentlemen over the age of 50 can request a PSA from their GP.

There is no national screening programme at the moment because the PSA test on its own is not foolproof. It is a simple blood test that measures the PSA level in the blood which, if raised, can be indication that prostate cancer could be present. However, many men with prostate cancer do not have a raised PSA, and many men who have a raised PSA that does not change over time do not have prostate cancer. We do not have a national screening programme because it is not a foolproof test in the way that a mammogram is for breast cancer.

A huge amount of research is going on about that right now. The team at University College London is working on PSA and integrating it with another test, to combine them to see if accuracy can be improved. If there were a more accurate screening test, there would be a strong case to bring that forward, but at the moment the accuracy of the test is holding us back.

Prostate Cancer UK has reported that over 310,000 people have completed their risk checker, so obviously a lot of good work is happening that is getting the voice out there. This debate today also helps raise awareness. As many hon. Members have said, we are encouraging men to come forward if they have concerns.

We also have the “Help Us Help You” NHS campaign, which is looking at a number of cancers, including prostate cancer. It has raised awareness of non-specific symptoms, which are often experienced by the patients who we have the hardest time diagnosing. This month, we are launching a campaign specifically about prostate cancer and the barriers to seeking treatment. The phases of the campaign that have run to date have contributed to the high levels of urgent cancer referrals the NHS has seen—around 11,000 referrals per day—as I mentioned earlier. The campaigns are working and people are coming forward, but there is a huge amount more that we can do.

In addition to these national initiatives, we also fund more local awareness raising through cancer alliances, where we specifically target communities who may be more at risk or less likely to come forward if they have symptoms. As part of that plan, every system will need to take ongoing action to support general practice capacity, so that if people come forward they are able to be seen as soon as possible.

We are also working on long-term prostate cancer improvements. Clearly, the covid pandemic had an impact on referrals, but there were long-term issues before the pandemic, as outlined by the shadow Minister, that we are now trying to address. Research is one of those issues. There is a wide range of treatments for prostate cancer. My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley talked about the watch and wait policy, and it has been quite successful. There are many older men with prostate

cancer that may have a less aggressive form, and this is where techniques such as watch and wait and seeing whether PSA is showing in their blood are very helpful. Many of those men will die of things other than prostate cancer. Watch and wait is a useful and robust treatment.

Treatments for prostate cancer are not without their side effects, despite our best efforts. We are working hard to improve treatments, both in terms of their success rate and the impact they have on a man's quality of life. The use of stereotactic radiotherapy, for example, to target prostate cancer and reduce side effects is making a huge difference to outcomes for men. Better surgical techniques, and state-of-the-art surgery, are also improving outcomes and the side effects from surgery. Hormone treatments are also available; research is pushing the barriers there. However, hormone treatments are not without their side effects. I reassure men that there is a wide range of treatments, depending on the type of prostate cancer that they have, that will not only treat their cancer but reduce the side effects.

In the spending review we announced an extra £5.9 billion of capital to support our recovery programme, particularly in diagnostics. That includes £2.3 billion to increase the volume of diagnostic activity in our community diagnostic centres. What we are trying to create in local communities is a situation where if someone presents with non-specific symptoms to their GP, we can use the community diagnostic centres to refer people so that they can have the tests—whether it is an ultrasound, an MRI, or blood tests—and can get a more rapid diagnosis than has historically been the case. We are rolling out 44 community diagnostic centres to increase our capacity, which could deliver up to 2.8 million scans in the first full year of operation. By 2024-25, the aim is to deliver at least another 56 of those centres. That will allow the NHS to carry out 4.5 million additional scans. The diagnostic centres will make a big difference, diagnosing people as quickly as possible and at as early a stage of their cancer as possible.

There are some pilot works going on that look at self-referral; that is particularly the case with breast and skin cancers. I do not want to speak for cancer alliances, but there could be an argument for prostate cancer to be included too, if people have specific symptoms. Watch this space with regards to self-referral and its ability to get people into the system as quickly as possible.

We also talked about workforce. As someone who has worked as a nurse specialist, I take it on board that a urology nurse specialist will often cover all urology cancers. There is a difference between treating someone for testicular cancer; they often tend to be younger men who need very different treatment. Prostate cancer is a very different type of cancer, but it is often lumped in under urology. I recognise that nurses there have a greater volume of patients to see than nurses treating other types of cancer. There is huge progress being made on that. There is investment going into workforce planning, and we are supporting the training and development of nurses, in particular, to become specialists and practitioners in both screening and diagnostics. It is not just about increasing numbers in our workforce; it is about giving them the skills and training to expand the roles and services that they can go into. That is at the forefront of our mind.

My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley talked about a men's health strategy. I will say to him that just by having a women's health strategy does not mean we

[Maria Caulfield]

are ignoring men at all. We are producing our health disparities White Paper very soon. Some of the issues that he talks about around life expectancy and differences in suicide rates will feature quite heavily in that. However, if he does not feel that that goes far enough, I am very happy to have a further conversation. There are differences, in some areas, for men and, on prostate cancer particularly, we can do more to support them with their diagnoses and treatment.

For many men, prostate cancer will be a chronic illness. We will be able to treat and cure many, but some will need to learn to live with their disease—people can live with quite advanced prostate cancer for many years—and it is about providing them with support. Living with prostate cancer often causes psychological challenges, where people are just getting on and dealing with it but are not getting the support that they need with many of the issues that they face. We fully recognise that that is something that we need to focus on.

I reassure colleagues that prostate cancer is very much top of our agenda in the cancer sphere. We are improving the facility to try to diagnose it much more easily. Treatments for prostate cancer are changing and improving all the time. We must focus on supporting men with prostate cancer through their cancer journey. We must encourage men to come forward and reassure them that they will be diagnosed quickly and receive the treatment that they need for their prostate cancer.

3.56 pm

Elliot Colburn: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions throughout this debate. I think that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) highlighted very well the danger in men often downplaying their

symptoms. I was struck by the statistic, given by my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), that one in five men will die before retirement. That is not a statistic that I had heard before; it is shocking, and shows the importance of taking these issues seriously.

I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), and the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar), for their contributions and, indeed, the Minister for her reply. I know, as someone who has worked in the NHS, as she has, that she obviously brings a great deal of expertise to the role. I know how seriously she takes it, as she was a cancer nurse in my borough.

We are lucky in the London Borough of Sutton; we have the Royal Marsden base, the Institute of Cancer Research and the Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust, all of which are working together to really drive improvements in cancer patient outcomes. Indeed, the £500 million investment that the Department has given to the two hospitals will do just that, so I really welcome it.

However, if there is one message for us all to take away from this debate, it is to encourage men to check their level of risk and to get themselves tested. If we have learned anything from the pandemic, it is the importance of getting tested, so I say to people, please, get out there and encourage people to, “Check your symptoms” and, “Get yourself tested”.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered NHS support for prostate cancer patients after the covid-19 pandemic.

3.58 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 10 March 2022

TREASURY

Income Tax Exemptions

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Frazer):

New social security payment in Scotland

The Government will legislate in spring 2022 to ensure that the new adult disability payment made by the Scottish Government will be exempt from income tax (as agreed in the 2016 fiscal framework agreement). The legislation will be retrospective from 1 March 2022.

HM Revenue and Customs will not collect any tax that may have been due on payments made from 1 March 2022 to the date the legislation takes effect.

This is being announced outside of the normal fiscal event process in order to ensure that those making the payments and the recipients know that they do not have to pay any tax on the payments.

Discretionary fund payments

The Government will legislate in spring 2022 to clarify that payments made through the discretionary fund (and the equivalent in the devolved Administrations) will be exempt from income tax. The discretionary fund is a £144 million fund that forms part of the package of support to help households with rising energy bills. Local authorities will use the fund to help households who are not eligible for a council tax rebate. Council tax rebates are not subject to income tax.

HM Revenue and Customs will not collect any tax that may have been due on payments made from 1 April 2022 to the date the legislation takes effect.

This is being announced outside of the normal fiscal event process in order to ensure that those making the payments and the recipients understand income tax is not due on the payments.

[HCWS669]

DEFENCE

National Shipbuilding Strategy

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):

Today the Prime Minister will announce the publication of the refresh to the national shipbuilding strategy, unveiling a comprehensive package of Government support to further a shipbuilding renaissance for the whole of the UK and bringing together over £4 billion of investment over the next three years. Following my appointment as shipbuilding tsar in 2019, we have been working across Government and our refreshed strategy encompasses the entire shipbuilding sector, both naval and civil, and its supporting supply chain. This will ensure that opportunities, best practice and benefits are shared across the enterprise.

This strategy refresh sets out a vision, endorsed by both Government and industry, to create a globally successful, innovative and sustainable shipbuilding enterprise that works for all parts of the UK.

A Command Paper has been laid before Parliament.

[HCWS670]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Digital Identity and Attributes

The Minister for Media, Data and Digital Infrastructure (Julia Lopez): I wish to inform the House that the Government have today published their response to the digital identity and attributes consultation.

In our increasingly digital world, and as technology devices become ever more integral to everyday life, being able to prove identities digitally is a tool which will give people more convenience, choice and security in how they access products and services. From making purchases, starting a new job, or moving house, it is important now more than ever that people and organisations can trust who they are dealing with as easily when transacting online as they do when dealing with others in the physical world.

Published in July 2021, the digital identity and attributes consultation sought views on three main proposals that could achieve a safe and secure digital identity system for the whole UK. Extensive engagement informed these proposals and the contents of the consultation response. We are determined to put the needs of individuals first with a strong focus on privacy, security and inclusion.

Based on the views received from respondents to the consultation, our response details the Government's intent to legislate, when parliamentary time allows, to enable the development of a secure and trusted marketplace for digital identities and attributes across the UK economy.

First, the Government will seek to introduce legislation that will establish a digital identity and attributes governance function. This will help to build a trusted ecosystem in which digital identities and attributes can be used safely and securely across the economy. The governance function will have oversight of the UK digital identity and attributes trust framework and will be responsible for the issuance of a trust mark to organisations certified against it. This will give confidence to individual users of digital identities and attributes that they can trust certified organisations to offer safe and secure digital products because they have a trust mark to show they are adhering to the standards of the UK trust framework.

The Government will also seek to introduce legislation to enable public bodies to allow secure digital checks by trust-marked organisations against personal data they hold for the purposes of identity and eligibility verification. This will allow people and businesses to have confidence that digital identities in the UK can be built on trusted datasets in a way which upholds UK standards of privacy and data minimisation.

Finally, the Government will seek to introduce legislation which will establish that data held by public bodies which are then shared digitally through the legal gateway, are equivalent to the same data shared through traditionally accepted forms of identification, such as physical passports. This will provide all parties that rely on these data with the clarity and confidence that digital identities and attributes can be trusted.

Further details can be found in the consultation response, available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/digital-identity-and-attributes-consultation/outcome/government-response-to-the-digital-identity-and-attributes-consultation>.

A copy of the consultation response will also be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS668]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Inquiry into the Death of Dawn Sturgess

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): I announced on 18 November 2021 the Government decision to establish an inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005, to investigate the death of Dawn Sturgess in Amesbury on 8 July 2018, after she was exposed to the nerve agent Novichok.

The inquiry will now be chaired by the Lord Hughes of Ombersley.

Lord Hughes is a retired judge who was a former judge of the Supreme Court, as well as a Lord Justice of Appeal and vice-president of the criminal division. Lord Hughes is also a judicial commissioner to the Investigatory Powers Commissioner's Office (IPCO).

In accordance with section 3(1) of the Act, this inquiry will be undertaken by Lord Hughes alone as chair.

The Government are establishing this inquiry after careful consideration of advice from Baroness Hallett, who led the inquest, that this is necessary to permit all relevant evidence to be heard.

This is an important step in ensuring that the family of Dawn Sturgess get the answers they need.

The current inquest will be suspended after the establishment of the inquiry. The inquiry will formally start on 17 March.

I will today place a copy of the terms of reference, which remain unchanged, for the inquiry in the Libraries of both Houses.

The inquiry's investigations will be a matter for the chair. As the sponsoring Department, the Home Office will provide support and ensure that the inquiry has the resources that it needs.

[HCWS671]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

The European Union (Withdrawal) Act and Common Frameworks Report

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Neil O'Brien): I am today laying before Parliament a report, "The European Union (Withdrawal) Act and Common Frameworks: 26 September to 25 December 2021" in line with the requirement under the EU (Withdrawal) Act 2018 for quarterly reports to be made to Parliament on the progress of the work to develop common frameworks. The report is available on gov.uk and details the progress made between the UK Government and devolved Governments regarding the development of common frameworks. This report details progress made during the 14th three-month reporting

period, and sets out that no "freezing" regulations have been brought forward under section 12 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act. A copy of "The European Union (Withdrawal) Act and Common Frameworks: 26 September to 25 December 2021" report has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The publication of the report reflects the Government's continued commitment to transparency.

[HCWS672]

PRIME MINISTER

Covid-19 Inquiry: Draft Terms of Reference

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): On 15 December I announced the appointment of the right hon. Baroness Heather Hallett DBE as chair of the forthcoming public inquiry into the covid-19 pandemic. In doing so, I made a commitment to consult Baroness Hallett and Ministers in the devolved Administrations on the terms of reference for the inquiry before publishing them in draft. This process is now complete, and I have today placed a copy of the draft terms of reference in the Library of the House and published them on gov.uk.

The terms of reference cover: preparedness; the public health response; the response in the health and care sector; and our economic response. Rightly, the terms of reference allow for an inquiry which is genuinely UK-wide, but which respects and does not duplicate any inquiry established on a devolved basis. Finally, the draft reflects the importance of the inquiry working to understand the experiences of those most affected by the pandemic—including bereaved families—as well as looking at any disparities evident in the impact of the pandemic and our response.

The inquiry will play a key role in learning the lessons from this terrible pandemic and in informing our preparations for the future. It is therefore vital that we get its terms of reference right and that people can have their say. To deliver this, Baroness Hallett will now lead a period of public engagement and consultation, which will last for four weeks. This process will inform further refinements to the terms of reference before they are finalised and the inquiry begins its important work.

[HCWS673]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Supporting People Nearing the End of their Lives

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Chloe Smith): The Government are committed to improving the level of support provided to people who are nearing the end of their lives. The special rules process allows simple and fast access to financial support through the benefits system. Last July, the Government announced their intention to expand eligibility for the special rules, which is currently aimed at those with six months or less to live, with a new 12-month end of life approach. Today, the Department for Work and Pensions

is introducing an amendment to the Universal Credit (UC) Regulations 2013, the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) Regulations 2008 and 2013 and the Decisions and Appeals Regulations 2013.

The regulations will apply in Great Britain and will come into force on 4 April 2022. They will mean that people who are thought to be in their final year of life will be able to receive vital support through the special rules six months earlier than they are able to at present, thereby increasing the number of people who are eligible and the length of time that they are able to receive this support for. This means that more people will be able to make a claim under the special rules, and as a result, they will not be subject to face-to-face assessments, waiting periods and, in the majority of cases, they will receive the highest rate of benefit. The 12-month approach supports clinicians by providing a realistic and straightforward definition, consistent with the current end of life definition used across the NHS.

The Government have amended UC and ESA, where the definition is in secondary legislation, and when parliamentary time allows they will also amend the special rules for personal independence payment, disability living allowance and attendance allowance, where the definition is contained in primary legislation.

Having a life limiting illness can cause unimaginable suffering for the patient and for their loved ones and we are committed to ensuring the benefits system supports people nearing the end of their lives. To support the implementation of the changes to the special rules criteria we are making today, we will provide clear and helpful communications for claimants, clinicians, and organisations that support people nearing the end of their lives so that they are clear about what they should do in light of these changes.

[HCWS674]

Petition

Thursday 10 March 2022

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Great British Railways headquarters

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Carnforth would be an ideal location for the new headquarters of Great British Railways; further that the creation of the headquarters would bring additional jobs to the community, as well as encourage new investment; further that Lancashire County Council should note the importance of this proposal; and further that an initial petition organised by Lancaster Civic Vision gained 220 signatories from the whole community.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to note the nomination of Carnforth to house the new headquarters of Great British Railways.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by David Morris, Official Report, 1 March 2022; Vol. 709, c. 1011.]

[P002714]

Observations from The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton):

A competition to select a national headquarters for Great British Railways (GBR), to be based outside of London, ensuring skilled jobs, investment and economic benefits are focused nationwide, was launched on 5 February 2022.

The GBR Transition Team is welcoming submissions from towns and cities from across Great Britain. The application itself will need to be made by a local authority which represents the town or city, in the form of a short expression of interest. Eligible local authorities include district, borough and city councils, unitary authorities, metropolitan borough, county councils and combined authorities.

Applicants will need to demonstrate they meet the competition's six selection criteria which are aligned with railway priorities, value for money and broader governmental policies. These will be:

1. Alignment to Levelling Up objectives
2. Connected and easy to get to
3. Opportunities for GBR
4. Railway heritage and links to the network
5. Value for money
6. Public support

More details on each of the criteria are given within the "Guidance to Applicants" section on the GBR Transition Team website available at www.gbrrt.co.uk/hq.

Applications for the competition close on Wednesday 16 March 2022. The GBR Transition Team will then create a shortlist of the most suitable locations which will go forward to the public consultation vote. Ministers will then make a final decision on the headquarters locations based on all information gathered.

ORAL ANSWERS

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Thursday 10 March 2022

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**not later than
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