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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 16 March 2022

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Growth Deals

1. **Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the impact of growth deals on the Scottish economy. [906009]

11. **John Stevenson** (Carlisle) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the impact of growth deals on the Scottish economy. [906021]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Iain Stewart): All parts of Scotland have a growth deal in implementation or negotiation, with the UK Government committing more than £1.5 billion. These agreements are stimulating local economies to build back better after the pandemic, delivering thousands of jobs across Scotland and enriching communities.

Andy Carter: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his answer. Does he agree that growth deals are an excellent example of the UK Government and the Scottish Government working together to extend opportunities and deliver jobs right across Scotland?

Iain Stewart: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that growth deals show what can be achieved when Scotland's two Governments work together. That is what people want. They are just one part of the UK Government's hugely ambitious levelling-up agenda, which last year saw the announcement of more than £191 million in investment projects in Scotland, supported by the levelling-up fund, the community renewal fund and the community ownership fund. In February, the levelling-up White Paper saw further good news for Scotland with the Glasgow innovation accelerator, which will create jobs and boost the regional economy. I very much hope that the Scottish Government will work with us on the levelling-up agenda, which covers a number of vital devolved areas and has the potential to transform the lives of people in Scotland.

John Stevenson: The Borderlands growth deal has been very well received on both sides of the border. It demonstrates the benefits of a close working relationship between councils, MPs and Government. Given that success, would the Minister envisage a further opportunity for a Borderlands mark 2?

Iain Stewart: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend that the Borderlands growth deal is a great demonstration of what can be achieved when we work together. I recently visited Innerleithen in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) and saw some of the great work that is happening there. What is really important about these growth deals is that they develop strong local partnerships that can form the basis for longer-term economic plans. My hon. Friend was a fantastic champion of the Borderlands growth deal, and I know that he will be at the forefront of developing these future plans.

Legislative Consent

2. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on legislation that has not received legislative consent from the Scottish Parliament. [906011]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): The Westminster Parliament can and does legislate for all of the UK, and we have always sought to do so with the consent of the relevant devolved Parliament when we legislate in areas of devolved competence. The Scottish Parliament has passed legislative consent motions for seven Bills in this Session where the legislative consent motion process has been engaged. However, as the hon. Gentleman knows, the SNP Scottish Government made it quite clear that they would not grant LCMs for Brexit-related Bills. We understand their position even if we do not agree with it, but following Brexit, it is this Government's duty to legislate sensibly for the whole of the United Kingdom, which has involved legislating without consent on a small number of occasions and may well mean doing so again in the future.

Patrick Grady: That small number of occasions includes the Elections Bill, the Professional Qualifications Bill, the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 and the withdrawal agreement itself. All were rejected by Scotland's Parliament but are taking effect anyway because this Tory Government never really believed in devolution in the first place. So is this actually the end of the Sewel convention, and is ignoring the Scottish Parliament the new normal?

Mr Jack: Quite simply, we are not going to take any lessons on defending devolution from a party that wants to destroy it.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): This morning, as ever, we have heard a lot from the SNP about respecting the Scottish Parliament and ignoring the Scottish Parliament. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is the height of disrespect for the permanent secretary of the Scottish Government, who remains accountable to the UK Cabinet Secretary and draws a six-figure salary, to refuse to appear in front of a Committee of the Scottish Parliament without giving a reasonable excuse as to why?

Mr Jack: I agree with my hon. Friend that reciprocal respect absolutely underpins the devolution settlement. As to the permanent secretary's decision not to appear in front of the Committee, that is entirely a matter for her.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Secretary of State, Ian Murray.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I am sure that the Secretary of State would like to join me in welcoming Dr Riches, who is watching our proceedings today. She is from the Royal Society and she is shadowing me as part of a pairing scheme. She is very welcome.

Holyrood unanimously approved a legislative consent motion for the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill, which included an amendment from my Labour colleague Michael Marra urging the UK Government to remove a provision that would require ownership of land only from 2014 to be registered in Scotland registered, when the requirement is from 2004 in England. So if someone has laundered Putin's dirty money in Scotland before 2014, they are in the clear. For example, Perthshire's Aberuchill castle was bought by the Russian steel magnate Vladimir Lisin for over £5 million in 2005. He has been on the Treasury's watchlist since 2008, but he is not covered. Vladimir Romanov, who bought Heart of Midlothian football club along with swathes of central Edinburgh, is allegedly hiding in Moscow under the protection of Putin. He would not be covered either, but both of them would be covered in England. Does the Secretary of State think that is right? What is he doing to implement the LCM amendment to sort this smugglers' cove in Scotland?

Mr Jack: I join the hon. Gentleman in welcoming the Royal Society pairs who are in London. I also thank the Labour party for its support for the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill—it is hugely appreciated.

On the registration of property, England and Wales changed the rules for transparency of ownership in 1999, but in Scotland they were changed in 2014. The problem we have is that, if we go back before 2014, there is a risk that third parties who did not know they were engaging with an overseas entity that was non-compliant could be hurt. That hurt would be for something they were engaged in unwillingly, and we must protect those third parties. That is the reason why we have not gone back before 2014, and the Joint Committee on the Draft Registration of Overseas Entities Bill, which reviewed the draft legislation, agreed with that, but I have every sympathy with the points the hon. Gentleman makes.

Ian Murray: I am sure that anomaly could be sorted to ensure that we do not hurt unsuspecting third parties. One of the most important ways to clamp down on illicit Russian money and influence in the UK is through the reform of Companies House. Despite Labour's attempts, the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022 does not contain such reforms, but they are important, because Scottish limited partnerships, which were set up for Scottish farmers in the 19th century, remain an outdated and opaque vehicle of ownership that is used in the 21st century to obscure beneficial ownership. There is widespread support for that change, but the Government refused to act. Will the Secretary of State commit now to reforming Scottish limited partnerships and wider company law so that we can see who actually owns the companies and shut down those laundering loopholes?

Mr Jack: The hon. Gentleman will also know that the UK Government clamped down on the abuse of Scottish limited partnerships in 2018, but we want to do more, and early in the next Session of Parliament there will be an updated economic crime Bill and further measures will be taken. He is absolutely right that those partnerships were being used by foreign individuals and companies to launder money. We know that. The reforms in 2018 increased transparency and put more stringent checks on the individuals forming those companies, but, hopefully with the support of the Labour party, we will tackle them in the next Session of Parliament.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): The Scottish National party likes to present itself as the defender of devolution, but does my right hon. Friend agree that there is an inherent contradiction between that position and its desire to rip our United Kingdom completely apart? Does he also agree that it is the UK Government who are promoting devolution, including the transfer of powers regained from the European Union?

Mr Jack: My hon. Friend will be delighted to know that I absolutely agree.

Mr Speaker: We come now to SNP spokesperson Pete Wishart.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Is it not the truth that Scotland has never experienced such sustained attacks on our democracy and our democratic institutions? As we have heard, legislative consent is now almost dead and buried, a feature of history, with Westminster now legislating in devolved areas. What is next in the Secretary of State's sights?

Mr Jack: There are various Bills that come through that are Brexit related: the Professional Qualifications Bill, which is linked to trade Bills, a reserved matter, would be one of them, and the Subsidy Control Bill would be another where we will not get an LCM. We know that, but we need to bring in subsidy controls, because state aid has reverted to the United Kingdom from the EU and it is a UK matter.

Pete Wishart: The Secretary of State does not get an LCM because Scotland's directly elected representatives do not agree with it and do not want it. That is why LCMs are withheld. Everybody can see what is going on, and everybody can see his attempts to undermine our democracy. Is it not the case that his muscular Unionism has been a disaster for Scottish democracy? In fact, it has even been a disaster for the Scottish Conservatives, who may or may not now have confidence in their Prime Minister. Is it not also the case that the Scottish people have no confidence in this Government to defend our parliamentary institutions?

Mr Jack: Absolutely not. We do the right things for Scotland. On the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, we brought the Bill forward without an LCM to protect Scotland's trade with the rest of the United Kingdom. The two principles that underpin it are mutual recognition and non-discrimination. That is because 60% of Scotland's trade is with the rest of the UK and a lot of jobs rely on it.

Transition to Net Zero

3. **Dean Russell** (Watford) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support Scotland's transition to net zero. [906012]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): The Government's net zero strategy outlines a comprehensive set of measures to transition to a green and sustainable future. This will support hundreds of thousands of well-paid jobs and leverage up to £90 billion of private investment by 2030 across the entire United Kingdom, including Scotland. All previously licensed fields, such as Cambo, are accounted for in projected production and estimated emissions. We are confident that they can be developed, even as we seek to achieve our commitment to net zero by 2050.

Dean Russell: Yesterday, I met my "Dean's Green Team" in Watford to talk about initiatives around making sure that the economy is greener and having a better environment. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the net zero strategy is even more important for energy security and that we are stronger as a Union when we work together on that?

Mr Jack: I agree with my hon. Friend. I know he is a great champion of net zero policies. As the Prime Minister set out earlier this week, now more than ever what the UK needs is a balanced approach to energy. Both the North sea and renewables can help guarantee a secure energy supply for households and businesses without relying on foreign imports, and it is greatly to be regretted that we cannot agree a UK-wide position on these issues, because by opposing the development of new oil and gas fields, the Scottish National party and the Greens risk driving jobs and investment elsewhere. However, I say to those working in the industry that fortunately for them, oil and gas is a matter reserved to the Westminster Government.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Our journey to net zero is critical not only to saving the planet, but to weaning us off any reliance on Russian gas. ScotWind, the largest offshore wind project in the world, has huge potential, but we must also live up to our values and ensure that Scotland's wind is not being used to power Putin's war. Will the Secretary of State ask Scottish Ministers to conduct an audit of ScotWind to guarantee that no ill-gotten Russian money is part of its financing and ensure that all successful contracts for difference are free of Russian involvement?

Mr Jack: As the hon. Lady will know—she makes a fair point—ScotWind is a matter for the Scottish Government, but I am sure they will be doing all they can to ensure that no Russian money is financing any of the successful contracts. On contracts for difference, the UK Government are working to ensure that no Russian money is underpinning UK infrastructure.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): You have to admire the brass neck of the Secretary of State, because it is his Government who have failed to deliver carbon capture and underground storage in Scotland, it is his Government who have failed to match fund the Scottish Government's just transition fund, and it is his Government

who oversee Scotland paying the highest electricity transmission charges in the entirety of Europe. When will he stop doffing his cap to Westminster and stand up for Scotland's renewable future?

Mr Jack: I agree with the hon. Gentleman on this point, and we have raised it many times with Ofgem, but it is an independent regulator, and it is looking again at transition charge reform.

Strengthening the Union

4. **Dr Neil Hudson** (Penrith and The Border) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on strengthening Union connectivity. [906013]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Iain Stewart): I have regular discussions with ministerial colleagues on improving Union connectivity and recently met Baroness Vere to discuss the final report of the Union connectivity review. I look forward to meeting the new Scottish Government Transport Minister, Jenny Gilruth, in the near future to discuss shared transport priorities.

Dr Hudson: As a Borderlands MP, I am strongly supportive of the extension of the Borders railway from Tweedbank through Longtown in my constituency and on to Carlisle. It would improve connectivity, benefit local communities and be a massive economic boost to our region, but the proposals have been under consideration for a long time now, and it is vital that we move forward with this project. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is essential that the UK and Scottish Governments work together and with local authorities to prioritise the delivery of this project, which would benefit local residents and businesses and strengthen our precious Union?

Iain Stewart: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that we need to work together on this project, which will be of benefit to his constituents and the whole country. I regret that the project has not had the priority we would like to see in the Scottish Government's strategic transport projects review 2, but we will continue to work with the Scottish Government and see how we can best support it. We have committed to the next stage of the project, and I hope the Scottish Government do, too.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On strengthening Union connectivity, can the Minister advise the House on what happened to the impossible bridge across Beaufort's Dyke? What kind of money was spent on something that never happened and did not connect the Union?

Iain Stewart: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that it is right that we look at all possible transport links. *[Interruption.]* He mocks, but if he looks at what the Scottish Government are proposing, they are looking at fixed tunnels linking parts of Scotland together. In the Union connectivity review, we are looking at strengthening—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Docherty-Hughes, just because you have put your mask on does not disguise the fact that you are shouting. In fact, the best thing is that the mask moves as well.

Iain Stewart: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we are prioritising upgrades to roads such as the A75 through Dumfries and Galloway, which will be one of the key transport routes connecting Northern Ireland, Scotland and England.

Levelling Up Communities

5. **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to level up communities across Scotland. [906014]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Iain Stewart): The benefits of the transformative levelling-up agenda have already been realised following round 1 of the levelling-up fund. Eight Scottish projects are receiving a share of £171 million, which will help to create jobs, boost training and grow productivity. Round 2 of the fund will open in spring in addition to another major funding mechanism, the UK shared prosperity fund.

Duncan Baker: What levelling-up plans are there specifically for the rural areas of Scotland, so that from the Outer Hebrides to Orkney, the highlands to the lowlands, the whole of Scotland can benefit?

Iain Stewart: All parts of Scotland will receive a share of the UK shared prosperity fund, which will provide £2.6 billion of new funding by March 2025 through an allocation rather than a competition. Additionally, the levelling-up White Paper includes the creation of a new islands forum, which will bring together local leaders from island communities across the UK to share challenges and experiences directly with the UK Government.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): A former European regional development fund recipient described to me the distribution of levelling-up funding as akin to the random sprinkling of confetti, because it is random and wide open to the sort of pork-barrelling that we saw in the stronger towns fund. Why will the Government not work directly with devolved Governments so that the funding dovetails with all the knowledge, experience and workstreams that already exist to ensure outcomes that can be measured against some recognisable targets?

Iain Stewart: I am rather surprised that the hon. Lady seeks to criticise levelling up as pork barrel politics when her constituency is benefiting from a multimillion-pound investment in the regeneration of Granton. I would have thought that she would be pleased with that.

Scottish Island Communities

6. **Simon Jupp** (East Devon) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support Scottish island communities. [906015]

7. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support Scottish island communities. [906016]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Iain Stewart): The UK Government have committed £50 million to the islands growth deal, which has resulted in islands communities benefiting from the highest per capita deal in Scotland. As I just mentioned, the levelling-up

White Paper announced the development of an islands forum, and I have recently had discussions with local partners on how to progress that important work.

Simon Jupp: The new islands forum announced in the levelling-up White Paper is a welcome step. It will connect island communities from Scotland to the south-west with key decision makers. What progress is being made on the proposal?

Iain Stewart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. On Monday, I had a useful conversation with the leader and chief executive of Orkney Islands Council. We are inviting local partners to discuss with us how best the forum can operate and deliver what we want to achieve in the islands.

Jerome Mayhew: The best support that any Government can give to an island community is access to a reliable and frequent ferry service. On that, the SNP has failed miserably and has managed to achieve the impossible double of sinking hundreds of thousands of pounds into ferries that will never float while the real service has had increased breakdowns and become worse and worse. Does my hon. Friend agree that the SNP has let down island communities across Scotland?

Iain Stewart: My hon. Friend raises an important point. It is of great concern to island communities that they cannot rely on ferry services, as has been the case for several years. I welcome the proposals in Transport Scotland's strategic plan for the renewal and replacement of the Clyde and Hebrides ferry services and the northern isles ferry services, but its record thus far does not fill me with confidence that they will be delivered.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Farmers and crofters in all Scotland's islands communities are facing the perfect storm of massive increases in the cost of fuel and fertilisers and increased competition on price from imports. Does the Minister agree that this would be a good time to revisit the work of the Groceries Code Adjudicator to ensure that farmers and crofters can get a fair price for their produce? Would he meet me and a delegation from the National Farmers Union of Scotland to discuss that?

Iain Stewart: I am delighted to say that I have made two very pleasurable visits to the right hon. Gentleman's constituency, and I have heard these concerns first hand. Of course I would be delighted to meet him and a delegation from NFU Scotland to take forward their concerns.

Green Freeports

8. **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact on the Scottish economy of establishing two green freeports in Scotland. [906017]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): I have regular discussions with my Cabinet colleagues on all relevant UK Government policies that support economic growth in Scotland. The landmark agreement between Scotland's two Governments to establish two new UK freeports will support the regeneration of communities in Scotland.

Dr Luke Evans: Freeports are a real opportunity to bolster the UK's economy. In the east midlands we have a freeport that is bringing 60,000 jobs and green investment. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that will be the case if two freeports go ahead in Scotland? Does that not demonstrate levelling up across the UK and our Union?

Mr Jack: Everyone who cares about Scotland's prosperity will welcome the additional UK Government investment of up to £52 million, on top of the massive tax and customs benefits to the Scottish economy, drawing in more private sector investment. I would have thought that all parties in Scotland would have welcomed the opportunities and jobs that will flow from the new freeports in Scotland. However, sadly the Scottish Greens, the SNP Government's coalition partners, oppose them, which shows how irresponsible it was for Mrs Sturgeon to invite a party so opposed to economic growth to join her in government.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Freeports around the world have long had an association with tax dodging and economic crime. In light of the Government's responsibility to bring forward an economic crime Bill No. 2, will they review their freeports policy?

Mr Jack: That is an utterly ridiculous question. I received a letter from a Scottish Government Minister saying that freeports were a "tarnished brand" reminiscent of smuggling and tax evasion, just before they signed up to our policy.

Hydrocarbons Sector

9. **Jacob Young** (Redcar) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the hydrocarbons sector in Scotland. [906018]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): The UK Government remain committed to our domestic offshore oil and gas sector, which continues to keep us warm, fuel our vehicles and strengthen our security of supply. At present, 75% of the UK's primary energy demand comes from oil and gas and it is therefore an essential part of our energy mix.

Jacob Young: The oil and gas industry in Scotland, in Teesside and around the country provides thousands of people with good quality, well-paid jobs, while keeping the lights on and keeping Britain moving. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that it is vital that we encourage North sea oil and gas exploration to ensure we have energy security and independence in this time of uncertainty, and that these sectors will help us to decarbonise in the long run and achieve our net zero goals through projects such as Net Zero Teesside?

Mr Jack: I agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of our domestic oil and gas sector. The North sea transition deal is a global exemplar of how a Government can work with the offshore oil and gas industry to achieve a managed energy transition that leaves no one behind. This Government support oil and gas, and the 100,000 jobs linked to that industry in Scotland, but we also support the transition, rather than the extinction, of that industry.

Renewable Energy Generation

10. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on promoting renewable energy generation in Scotland. [906019]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Iain Stewart): I regularly discuss issues of importance to Scotland with Ministers, including support for Scotland's renewable energy sector. The Government recently announced that their flagship renewable electricity support scheme, contracts for difference, will run more frequently. Scotland has benefited significantly from this scheme with 34% of all projects awarded to date located in Scotland.

Bill Esterson: Promoting renewable energy generation in Scotland is critical to supporting jobs in Scotland, but without action from the Government, it is not inevitable that Scotland's renewable potential will lead to job creation at home. In fact, we have seen ScotWind sold off to foreign owners. Can the Minister tell me what discussions he is having with Scottish Ministers about the creation of jobs in Scotland in renewable energy?

Iain Stewart: I am happy to tell the hon. Gentleman that we are negotiating with and discussing with the Scottish Government, and I can point to a number of schemes in the city and regional growth deals that are promoting renewable energy, such as the CoRE—community renewable energy—project in East Ayrshire, Orion in Shetland and European Marine Energy Centre research in Orkney.

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

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [906093] **Dean Russell** (Watford) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 16 March.

The Deputy Prime Minister (Dominic Raab): Mr Speaker, I have been asked to reply on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. As the House will know, he is travelling in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia to discuss energy security, diplomatic action on Russia in Ukraine and regional issues, including Iran.

Mr Speaker, with your forbearance, may I also say that I understand that four Members of the Ukrainian Parliament are here with us in the Gallery today? I am sure I speak for the whole House in saying that we stand in total solidarity with them. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

Dean Russell: Camelot is one of the largest employers in Watford and for Watford, and its employees have worked tirelessly to run the national lottery successfully for decades, playing an important role in communities across the UK with many local projects and good

causes, including in my constituency. I obviously declare an interest in the Gambling Commission's decision yesterday not to appoint the licence to Camelot, but given the current situation in Ukraine, does my right hon. Friend consider it appropriate that the next licensee of the operator of the national lottery is known to have a joint venture with Gazprom?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Can I thank my hon. Friend, and just say what an incredible job the national lottery has done delivering £45 billion to good causes? He is right that the fourth licence will ensure operator profits are better aligned with returns to good causes. I would also say, on the specific points he makes, that I understand that Allwyn's owner, Mr Komárek, who has long criticised the Putin regime, is in discussions with the Czech Republic Government regarding the joint venture with Gazprom and removing its involvement.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the deputy Leader of the Opposition.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I also welcome the Ukrainian MPs to this House today.

Can I start by wholeheartedly welcoming the positive steps towards returning Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anoosheh Ashoori to the UK? I am sure Members across the House want to show their support for their families and them. I know the Deputy Prime Minister would agree that this devastating situation must never be repeated, and other British nationals still trapped in Iran need to be brought home. So will he commit to a review of these cases to understand what more could have been done by the British Government to secure releases and whether the lazy comments of the Prime Minister worsened the situation?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I should first say that I cannot yet confirm the reports we have seen in the media, but of course it feels like positive signs. No one wants more than me—although I am sure all Members of the House want this—to see Nazanin and all the arbitrarily detained nationals reunited with their loved ones. I can tell the right hon. Lady, having worked for two years with the concerted diplomatic effort led by the Prime Minister, that we have done absolutely everything that we can. She should not give succour to the despotic regime that detained our nationals in Iran, or those around the world, by suggesting it is anyone else's responsibility other than theirs.

Angela Rayner: It is exactly for that reason that I asked for the review. It is important to learn from our mistakes so that other innocent families do not face this ordeal again. I hope that the Deputy Prime Minister will consider my comments.

I would like to thank all the people who have been working tirelessly to bring British nationals home from Iran, our diplomatic staff and our world-leading British intelligence agencies. The role of British intelligence today is critical in the face of Putin's aggression. The Deputy Prime Minister oversaw our foreign intelligence services as Foreign Secretary, so can he confirm if at any time he overruled or ignored direct advice from the British security services?

The Deputy Prime Minister: What the right hon. Lady suggests is nonsense. She is talking about the House of Lords Appointments Commission, and it has a vetting process. I have never overruled intelligence advice, and I would not comment on the details of it. I do agree with her on the strength and agility of the British diplomatic service, who time and time again are the unsung heroes in returning British nationals, often in less celebrated cases. Now is a great opportunity to recognise the heroic work that they do.

Angela Rayner: I agree with the Deputy Prime Minister's comments on the diplomatic service's heroic work. He was Foreign Secretary on 17 March 2020 when British intelligence reportedly warned against granting a peerage to the Prime Minister's close friend who is now Lord Lebedev of Hampton and Siberia. Forty-eight hours later, the Prime Minister visited Lebedev at his home in London. Details of that meeting have never been released. In July 2020, Lebedev's appointment as a peer was announced. Can the Deputy Prime Minister tell the House what changed between the security warning and the appointment?

The Deputy Prime Minister: As the right hon. Lady knows full well, all individuals are nominated for a peerage in recognition of their contribution to society. I should say that that includes those of Russian origin who contribute brilliantly to our nation—many of whom in this country are critics of the Putin regime. Life peerages are vetted by the House of Lords Appointments Commission for matters of probity. Frankly, she should know better.

Angela Rayner: What I do know better is that a central duty of any Government is to keep the British people safe. There are now widespread reports that the Prime Minister did not accept warnings from our own intelligence services about granting a Russian oligarch—the son and business partner of a KGB spy—a seat here in this Parliament. It should not matter if such a warning was about a close personal friend of the Prime Minister. It should not matter if he gave the Prime Minister thousands of pounds of gifts. It should not matter how much champagne and caviar he serves. There are no ifs or buts when it comes to the safety of the British people. So I ask the Deputy Prime Minister: can he guarantee that the Prime Minister never asked anyone to urge the security services to revise, reconsider or withdraw their assessment of Lord Lebedev of Hampton and Siberia?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The suggestion that the right hon. Lady is making is sheer nonsense. But if she wants to talk about national security, I remind her that not so long ago she and her shadow Cabinet colleagues wanted the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) to be Prime Minister—a man who wanted and talked about abolishing the Army and pulling out of Trident. She voted for that. Has there ever been a more ridiculous, reckless, naive moment to call for unilateral nuclear disarmament and to pull out of NATO? A Labour Government would put at risk our security. We are doing everything that we can to protect it.

Angela Rayner: Labour Governments increased support for our Army. Labour is committed to NATO. I remind the Deputy Prime Minister that it was his Prime Minister

who said in 2015 that he was not sure if it was morally irresponsible to work with Putin. I do not think the Deputy Prime Minister is on safe ground there.

Last week, my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition said that Britain should never again be at the mercy of a foreign dictatorship for our energy and fuel security. This week, the Prime Minister has gone cap in hand from one dictator to another, on a begging mission for the Saudi prince to bail him out. The Government have had 12 years to end their reliance on foreign oil and to invest in home-grown energy to secure our supplies. Their failure has left us all vulnerable, reliant on another murderous dictator to keep the lights on and the pumps open. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I am going to hear this question. If some people do not want—*[Interruption.]* If someone wants a little argument, I am more than happy to argue outside the Chamber, but for the moment I need to get on and I want to hear the question.

Angela Rayner: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Government Benches have a choice. They could accept Labour's plan to save working families hundreds of pounds on bills, funded with a one-off levy on the soaring profits of big energy companies. So I ask the Deputy Prime Minister, is their only plan to keep on begging?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Can I just gently say to the right hon. Lady that when she was campaigning, as the rest of them were, to make the right hon. Member for Islington North Prime Minister, this Prime Minister was the Foreign Secretary leading the response to the nerve agent attack.

Mr Speaker: Order. I hate to say it, but the Deputy Prime Minister cannot keep going back 12 years as a defensive mechanism. What we want to do—*[Interruption.]* I will decide, thank you. What I want you to do, Deputy Prime Minister, please, is to try to stick to the general rules without talking about history. I have a lot of people ahead of me who are desperate to get in. How far we want to go back, in passing, is one thing.

The Deputy Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. When—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Sir Desmond, the Deputy Prime Minister is not responsible for the Opposition's policies. This is about the Government and questions to the Deputy Prime Minister. I will decide which questions are right.

Dominic Raab: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I wanted just to point out, and I hope it is not ancient history, that the Prime Minister was, as Foreign Secretary, galvanising the response to the nerve agent attack in Salisbury at the time when the right hon. Member for Islington North, the former leader of the Labour party, was siding with Putin against the UK. What did the right hon. Lady have to say on Sky News? That he was a very strong leader and she could not wait for him to become Prime Minister. *[HON. MEMBERS: "More!"]*

Angela Rayner: There is a war in Europe. There is a fuel energy crisis in Britain. Democracy is at risk. We must support the courageous efforts of President Zelensky and the Ukrainian people. These uncertain times require

leadership with integrity, a leader who works with the security services, can be trusted to say the right thing for British diplomacy, and provides security for the British people. Instead, we have this sorry excuse of a Government sat before us. They hike tax on 27 million working people, while the super-rich increase their wealth. They watch energy prices rise by over 50% while companies enjoy profits they did not even expect. They cavort with Russian oligarchs in luxury villas while neglecting the security of the British people. Remember, they partied while the country was in lockdown and unable to see their dying loved ones. Can the Deputy Prime Minister look the British people in the eye and really say that this Government are doing their best in their interests?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, I will tell you what this Government and this Prime Minister have done: 1,000 Russian individuals sanctioned with a combined wealth of \$45 billion; the impact of the sanctions and the diplomatic effort that this Foreign Secretary and this Prime Minister have led; the rouble plummeting; the Russian stock market record lows; and interest rates doubled. We have also shown the big-hearted spirit of this Government, and indeed this nation, with 5,500 visas granted to Ukrainians to come here, and the humanitarian route, which has now got 100,000 sponsors applying to take Ukrainian families into their homes. While the right hon. Lady is in her social media echo chamber, that is what this Government are doing.

Q2. [906094] Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): It was very good to see my right hon. Friend visiting the International Criminal Court earlier this week, but it has enduring difficulties with funding. Last year, it had a \$40 million shortfall in its budget because some participating states failed to meet their annual contribution. The International Criminal Court is only as good as the sum of its parts, so what steps can the Government take to secure contingency funding to ensure that one day Russian military commanders in Ukraine can expect to stand trial for war crimes that they have committed?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is bang on. The Assembly of States Parties is looking at the arrears. I was in The Hague on Monday speaking to the Prosecutor and the President of the Court. We will be coming forward with a voluntary package of financial and technical support because now, as it looks at the situation in Ukraine, we want—and I think the whole House would want—Putin and his commanders to know that if they continue with war crimes in Ukraine, they will end up not just in the dock of a court, but behind bars.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Westminster leader of the SNP.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I welcome our four colleagues from the Parliament of Ukraine who are with us today? We all stand with them.

I have spent much of the past week trying to help the Scottish charity Dnipro Kids, which was established by fans of Hibernian football club. It has evacuated 48 children from orphanages in Ukraine and is desperately attempting to provide them with temporary sanctuary in Scotland. There is a plane ready and waiting in Poland to bring

these orphans to the UK on Friday, but that flight will leave empty without the necessary paperwork from the Home Office.

The Polish authorities, Edinburgh City Council, the Scottish Government and the orphans' guardians are all working to bring these children to safety. I have worked with UK Government Ministers to try to make that happen—I commend Lord Harrington in particular for his efforts—but a week on, the Home Office is still proving to be the only obstacle in the way, and it risks leaving these children stranded. I am pleading with the Deputy Prime Minister to remove these obstructions before it is too late. Will he work with me and the Ukrainian authorities to guarantee that these 48 Ukrainian orphans will get on that plane this Friday?

The Deputy Prime Minister: May I thank the right hon. Gentleman for all he is doing? This is a heart-rending situation; we want to do everything we can. Of course, there are a range of issues in this case, including the wishes of the Ukrainian Government on where orphan children should go and should be living, and whether any necessary permissions have been sought from the Ukrainian and/or the Polish Government. This is not actually about bureaucracy—it is about genuine safeguarding issues—but I certainly want to work with the right hon. Gentleman in the best interests of those children.

Ian Blackford: I am asking the Government to do just exactly that, because we have been working with the Ukrainian and Polish authorities and we have their support. We need the Home Office to give us the paperwork that will make it happen.

This one case goes to the heart of the failure in the UK Government's response to the biggest refugee crisis in Europe since world war two. It is deeply concerning that it has taken the intervention of several Ministers of State, letters to multiple European ambassadors and the fear of the case being exposed in the Chamber to try to force movement in this urgent case involving almost 50 vulnerable children. Even where there is the will, it seems that there is simply no way the Home Office can get involved. I should not have been sending letters to the authorities in Ukraine and Poland; the Home Office should have been doing it.

If all these powerful people cannot make it happen, what hope have all the other children fleeing this awful war of finding sanctuary in the UK? The United Nations now estimates that almost one child a second is becoming a refugee from the war in Ukraine. These 48 children will not be the last who need sanctuary and safety. Surely the Deputy Prime Minister agrees that it should not have taken this level of intervention and pressure for the Home Office to do the right thing by these children.

The Deputy Prime Minister: May I just say to the right hon. Gentleman that it is very important that the proper international practices on safeguarding are followed? I know he appreciates that. We are keen to find out whether family reunion options with Ukrainian family in the region have been considered. We also know—*[Interruption.]* Could he just listen for a second, because this is important? We also know that many children in state care in Ukraine have family members in the region for the safeguarding and wellbeing of the children. That must also be considered.

More broadly, the right hon. Gentleman raises the issue of refugees and children. On top of the measures that I have already mentioned, we are making plans for the arrival of 100,000 Ukrainian children in our schools, through the Secretary of State for Education, and I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care for bringing Ukrainian children suffering from cancer over to this country to receive the vital treatment that they need.

Q3. [906095] Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): British servicemen and women have served under Operations Cabrit and Orbital since 2015, working with the Ukrainian armed forces and helping to shore up the eastern flank of NATO, which is now more important than ever. Will the Deputy Prime Minister join me in putting on record the gratitude of the House, and will he consider what recognition we can give those people for their service and for their role in history?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to pay tribute to the professionalism, dedication and sacrifices made by our servicemen and women every day to defend this country. As she will know, recognition for all military operations is kept under continuous review, and I know that the Defence Secretary will have heard her compelling suggestions.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): May I first wish you, Mr Speaker, and the entire House an early happy St Patrick's Day?

The Government set a 3.1% increase in universal credit and other benefits last September, but inflation is now pushing 7%. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Trussell Trust and many other organisations have highlighted the real jeopardy that millions of people now face from a real-terms cut in the level of benefits, for which other measures from the Government simply do not compensate. Surely it is not tenable for the Government to stick so rigorously to a decision made six months ago, given that circumstances have changed so radically since then.

The Deputy Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right about the cost of living challenges, not least given the war in Ukraine. The Government and the Chancellor have already provided a £20 billion package across this year, £9 billion to help with energy bills and the rest to deal with the wider cost of living issues. That includes raising the national living wage. As for universal credit, we are giving nearly 2 million families an extra £1,000 a year. We have introduced the kickstart scheme, and have increased the personal tax threshold by more than 50% since 2010. We are doing everything we can, and of course we will keep those cost of living issues under constant and regular review.

Q6. [906098] Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): With multinationals scaling back Russian operations and local businesses stepping forward with jobs and equipment, once again we see British businesses responding at a time of great challenge. Will the Deputy Prime Minister join me in thanking all the Lincolnshire businesses that have offered support, and will he tell us how the Government may be able to connect those offers of support with the Ukrainians who are in most need?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in thanking all those businesses, but I also thank all the charities and individual families up and down the country who have shown the traditional big-heartedness that makes this country so great. My hon. Friend will, of course, be aware of the new sponsorship scheme, for which 100,000 people have applied. Working with businesses is particularly valuable, not just in allowing those who come here to gain access to work but in helping them to integrate into society as confident members of our community.

Q4. [906096] **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I am sure the Deputy Prime Minister will agree that when it comes to judging a person, it is often done by the company they keep. When it comes to tennis, the Prime Minister enjoys both the company and the backhanders of Lubov Chernukhin. When it came to celebrating the election victory, he prioritised the party hosted by the former KGB agent Alexander Lebedev. The Prime Minister counts a great many others—such as Victor Fedotov and Alex Temerko—as friends. Can the Deputy Prime Minister tell us what first attracted the Prime Minister to the billionaire Russian oligarchs?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I was not quite sure where the hon. Gentleman was going at the beginning of his question, but I can tell him that the Prime Minister is not just a very social individual—[*Laughter.*] He also wants this country to be open and outward-looking to the world. We were the Government—he was the Prime Minister and I was the Foreign Secretary—who introduced the Sergei Magnitsky sanctions, which include human rights sanctions, asset-freezing and visa bans. Those have been applied not just to Russians when we have evidence of wrongdoing, but to the murderers of Khashoggi, the persecutors of the Myanmar minority, and many others. It was this Government who did that, not the Labour party.

Q7. [906099] **Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): The eyes of the world are rightly focused on Putin's evil invasion of Ukraine, but there is still a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. I welcome the fact that, later this month, the UK Government are hosting a pledging conference for that crisis. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that we also keep education for those poor children on the agenda?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We will keep the focus on Afghanistan and the many other conflicts around the world that need our support. That particular conference will provide specific support for girls to access education, which is a long-standing priority of the Prime Minister. We have doubled our humanitarian aid to Afghanistan for the financial year to £286 million.

Q5. [906097] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Appeasing murderous despots will never be the route to security of energy supply. Would it not make more sense for the Prime Minister to be here talking to UK energy industries? Should he not be talking to renewable energy developers about what they can do to bring their product onstream quicker? Should he not also be speaking to our offshore oil and gas industry

about what it can do in the here and now to improve security of supply and to assist in the journey towards net zero?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The Prime Minister did that on Monday evening, and it is now Wednesday. Yes, he is out in Saudi Arabia to close a £1 billion investment deal that will create 700 jobs in the north in renewable energy. I think the Lib Dems need to keep up.

Q9. [906101] **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): North Norfolk is a rural constituency. Many residents rely on their car to get around, and they heat their homes with heating oil. The price of crude oil may have come down in the last few days, but the price at the petrol pumps is still going up. I have constituents who have been quoted £2 a litre for heating oil. This affects not only working families but pensioners in rural areas who are on a fixed income. Will the Deputy Prime Minister do everything he can to make sure we address these problems in the spring statement for very rural constituencies that are getting the double whammy of these crippling costs?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He knows we have a £20 billion package this year to deal with the cost of living, and £9 billion of it is focused on energy prices. His comments on the issues for his constituents, and for constituents across the country, are very well made, and I know the Chancellor will have heard his suggestions.

Q8. [906100] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The Prime Minister is visiting Saudi Arabia and, as usual, we are told there will be frank, private discussions on the Saudis' human rights record. In the light of the state murder of Jamal Khashoggi, and in the light of the brutal execution of 81 men at the weekend, why does the Deputy Prime Minister think the UK's representations on human rights are so ineffective? What more will we do to make the Saudis behave ethically?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I went to Riyadh twice when I was Foreign Secretary, and I know the Prime Minister will be raising these issues again. We talked about women's rights defenders. The hon. Gentleman says we have been ineffective, but they have all been released. We talked about Raif Badawi, the author and critic, and he was recently released.

The hon. Gentleman mentions Jamal Khashoggi, and we were one of the first to apply asset freezes and visa bans to those responsible for his murder. We are an international country, and this is Britain's role in the 21st century, but we will never allow our moral red lines to be blurred.

Q10. [906102] **Tom Hunt** (Ipswich) (Con): Rousseau once said, "You may swallow the Poles, but you will never digest them." That powerful quote says so much for how the Polish people have stood up robustly and strongly against aggression over the years and about their steadfast support right now for their close and dear allies, the Ukrainian people.

Three lorries have gone from Ipswich to Lviv in support of the Ukrainian people. Will the Deputy Prime Minister outline the steps the Government are taking to support our close ally, Poland, as it takes unprecedented numbers of refugees while, of course, it has its own security concerns in relation to Russia?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I pay tribute to not only his constituents, but the Polish community in particular for their big-hearted support for the people of Ukraine. As a leading donor—I believe the second largest donor to Ukraine—we have committed a further £174 million in aid, bringing our total to £400 million. But that will also support those countries in close proximity to Ukraine—its neighbours—and first and foremost will be Poland.

Q11. [906103] **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): On 28 April 2018, when he was Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister is reported to have attended a party at a castle in Italy, where he met a former KGB officer. That was just weeks after the Salisbury poisonings and immediately after he attended a NATO summit on Russia. If that is not astonishing enough in itself, it is also reported that he travelled there without any security detail or officials present. So will there now be an investigation into what sounds like a complete failure of national security?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is talking total nonsense and I do not have anything to add to what I have already said.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): In addition to having concerns for Ukraine, my constituents are also concerned about planning policy. I wrote to the Prime Minister in October 2019 about the threat to the Goring gap. It is against Government policy and against the public interest for every green field that is a strategic gap to be built on. An inspector has made a decision that would wipe away the planning powers of every local council in the country. May I ask whether the Prime Minister will see me and whether the Government will revoke this inspector's mistaken decision?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that. As someone with a massive proportion of green belt in my constituency, I empathise with the frustrations that Members from across the House feel with some planning decisions that are made. However, once a planning decision is final, it cannot be challenged unless it is successfully challenged in the courts.

Q12. [906104] **Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): Last year, 255 children and young people were admitted to Barnsley Hospital for self-harm—that is 15 times the national average. This is a public health crisis, so will the Deputy Prime Minister ask the Health Secretary to meet me and healthcare providers from Barnsley to immediately respond to this mental health crisis?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We have put a huge amount into both mental health and the wider NHS budget, not just on covid, but to respond to the wider issues. On the specific issue the hon. Lady raises, I will certainly make sure that an appropriate health Minister will see her.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Are any oligarchs with UK passports on our sanctions list?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank the Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee for that. I think I will have to let the Foreign Secretary and the Foreign Office check carefully and respond to him in due course.

Q13. [906105] **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): Three weeks ago, the chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir David Norgrove, wrote to the Prime Minister to point out that his repeated assertion that employment is now higher than it was before the pandemic is incorrect. Yesterday's employment statistics show 840,000 fewer self-employed people now than before the pandemic and that overall employment is 580,000 lower. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that truthfulness is vital to trust in our democracy? Does he accept the correction from Sir David Norgrove?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Of course we listen carefully to Sir David Norgrove, but what I would say to the right hon. Gentleman is that he points to the data yesterday and it showed that unemployment has fallen below 4%, is back at pre-pandemic levels and is being termed a remarkable success by everyone, including the Resolution Foundation. He talks about the truth and there is one golden truth: whenever there has been a Labour Government in the past, unemployment has always been higher when they left office than when they started. That is the jobs guarantee you get with Labour.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): We have now provided more than 3,000 anti-tank weapons, training and other military support to Ukraine, alongside crushing financial sanctions on Russia and more bilateral assistance, humanitarian assistance and aid than any other country. But can my right hon. Friend confirm that we will continue to deliver further military aid and support, and that we will supply the Starstreak anti-aircraft missiles necessary to destroy Russian jets?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to say that we have delivered more than 3,600 anti-tank weapons. We will also be sending a consignment of the Javelin anti-tank missiles and we are indeed, as he says, exploring the donation of Starstreak anti-aircraft missiles.

Q14. [906106] **Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is welcome that Ukrainians seeking asylum in Britain will have the right to work and access to public services; we should always offer sanctuary to those fleeing persecution. People who come to Britain to make it their home no matter where they are from or the colour of their skin make a hugely positive contribution to our society and economy if supported to do so. So how can the Government now justify not extending the same welcome and the same rights, including the right to work, to all people seeking asylum in Britain?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right that we have a strong tradition, as we have shown: we have stepped up to the plate with the Hong Kong British national overseas citizens, and with Operation Pitting which brought 17,000 back from Afghanistan, and we will go further and beyond the normal rules when there is a crisis, as we have seen in Ukraine. He is absolutely right about the current scheme: those Ukrainians coming here can live, work and access benefits, and can stay for three years with leave to remain. I am proud, and the whole House should be proud, not just of the big-hearted approach of this Government, but the 100,000 British sponsors who have come forward and said they will open their homes to those refugees.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): As the brilliant Ukrainian people fight and die on a daily basis for their rights of freedom and democracy, it is important that we make something very clear and I ask my right hon. Friend to do so. They have asked for membership of NATO for a significant period of time, and NATO has chosen not to give it to them. My concern now is, no matter what they decide, it remains their absolute right as a free nation and a free people to make such an application in the future, and, noticing that Finland is talking about becoming a member, we treat them in exactly the same way we would an application from Finland.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend and he will have heard what President Zelensky has said overnight in relation to this, but the Government have always been crystal clear that if there is a diplomatic off-ramp—although I have to say we have a heavy

measure of scepticism about whether Putin could ever fulfil such a deal—it has to be done with the will and volition of the Ukrainian President and people.

Q15. [906107] **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): A constituent of mine is a popular parish priest in Glasgow. Originally from Nigeria, he became a British citizen last year and applied for his first British passport last summer. His naturalisation certificate, issued by the Home Secretary, includes his title, reverend father, under his name. This is causing the Passport Office unexplained difficulties and seven months on he is still waiting for his passport. Will the Deputy Prime Minister look at this case as a matter of urgency? His mother is extremely ill in Nigeria; he needs to get his passport to visit her.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that case. It sounds very sensitive and I will make sure a Home Office Minister looks at it as a matter of urgency.

Points of Order

12.39 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you had any notification from the Home Secretary, the Minister for Crime and Policing or the safeguarding Minister, the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), that they intend to respond to the independent safeguarding report published yesterday outlining the deeply disturbing circumstances in which a child was strip-searched in the most degrading way by police in her school with profound and distressing consequences for the child involved? The report is clear that this should not have been allowed to happen; it is extremely distressing that it did. The report raises very serious questions about safeguarding, policing, training, guidance, racism and protection for children, and it has recommendations for both the Home Office and the Department for Education. Given these very troubling circumstances, have you, Mr Speaker, had any notification that any Minister is planning to respond to this report?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for giving me notice of the point of order. The issue she has raised is a very serious one, and I am sure she is correct that all Members will be concerned by it, as I am. I have not had notice of a statement; however, as the right hon. Member is aware, there are various ways in which the issue can be raised and I am sure that she and other Members will pursue the issue. I recognise that those on the Government Benches will have heard the point of order. It is quite right that we need an update to the House.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) is right. It seems that neither the parents nor the teachers were involved. I share her concern, as do others, to ensure that what has happened in this case does not happen in any other police forces across the United Kingdom. I again endorse what the right hon. Lady said. May I ask, through you, Mr Speaker, whether the parents and the teachers were notified? It seems that they were not.

Mr Speaker: Unfortunately, I am not answerable for that question. It is a very important question but I do not have that information. I assure the hon. Member that if I had had it, I would have answered the question.

Healthcare (Delayed Discharges)

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

12.41 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about expediting the transfer of patients who are medically fit for discharge from acute hospitals to homely settings in the community.

I declare my interest as a doctor.

Twenty years ago, I asked that leave be given

“to bring in a Bill to provide an upper limit on the time that a person who is ready in all respects for discharge must wait before leaving an acute hospital.”—[*Official Report*, 12 February 2002; Vol. 380, c. 76.]

The context in 2002, as now, was severe congestion in health and social care. Bed blocking is a provocative term that I use to draw attention to the harm caused to patients and the burden on our national health service. At that time, on any given day around 6,000 beds were occupied by people who should not have been in them. Indeed, Tony Blair told the House that

“bed blocking is probably the most urgent problem that we face in the national health service.”—[*Official Report*, 4 July 2001; Vol. 371, c. 259.]

In November, my mother-in-law died in Salisbury’s renowned spinal unit, but Selma did not have a spinal problem. She had the general frailty and multiple comorbidities of advanced old age. Her overall management was good, in parts, but modern district general hospitals are not configured for the long-term care of the elderly or for terminal care, so a good and gentle person spent her final days in acute medicine’s bewildering freneticism, noise and clamour. It was very far from ideal. She deserved much better. I have seen much better, notably in community hospitals and intermediate care—settings that have, foolishly in my view, been deprioritised under successive Governments.

An acute hospital is no place for an elderly person who is no longer receiving active medical management. I would go further and say that our frantically busy acute units, operating in the white heat of high-tech, cutting-edge medicine, can be unsafe for them. They are in constant danger of the serious iatrogenic consequences of unnecessarily prolonged stays, including hospital-acquired infections, thrombosis, skin breakdown, mental illness and psychological distress. The care pathway must lead frail elderly people to homely settings in the community that are appropriate to their needs, without delay. That long-held conviction, and my recent family experience, has driven me, 20 years after my original Bill, to have another go.

Bed blocking is everybody’s business, because our relatively efficient health system is always running hot, with bed occupancy rates far higher than those in most comparable healthcare economies. The cost to healthcare is enormous: the cost per day of an acute medical bed far outstrips the cost of homely settings in the community, supported living at home, community hospitals or nursing homes. The charity, Marie Curie, puts the annual cost at £1.5 billion. This zero-sum gain is stoked up by an institutional conspiracy of inaction, and that is because there is a baked-in perverse incentive for cash-strapped local authorities to drag their feet when getting people out of hospitals and onto their books. Hospitals save

because beds, once freed up, fill up with people requiring treatment and procedures, the costs of which are, of course, front loaded.

In February 2020, an average of 5,370 people per day were bed blocking. We do not know what has happened since as data collection was suspended. Up till then, delays attributed to the NHS were hovering at about 60%. Delays attributable to social care—that is to say local authorities—were consistent at about 30%. The remaining 10% were attributed to failures by both NHS and social care. It would be good to compare and contrast trust performance, but the data are no longer available.

Back in 2002, the main roadblock in the care pathway was different. Speaking to my Bill then, I said that

“insufficient community care and support is the greatest single impediment to timely discharge. The Bill would facilitate a model based on the Swedish approach to delayed discharges. That hugely successful innovation provides for cash transfers and penalties between agencies to achieve bed blocking targets.”—[*Official Report*, 12 February 2002; Vol. 380, c. 77.]

Indeed, the Blair Government went on to bring in legislation based on the Swedish model a year later in what became the Community Care (Delayed Discharges etc.) Act 2003. The Act permitted NHS trusts to charge local authorities £100 a day from 48 hours after patients were judged fit to leave hospital. A compensating £100 million three-year cash transfer from NHS to social services created a virtuous money circle.

Bed blocking was actually falling before those measures were introduced. However, evidence of the policy's success came in the wake of the Care Act 2014. The 2014 Act amended the 2003 Act from a local authority “must make a payment” to one in which an NHS body “may” require the authority to pay up, and bed blocking started to climb once again. The number of delayed discharge days in the NHS increased from an average of 114,000 a month in 2012 to more than 200,000 in October 2016.

Covid catalysed the discharge to assess—D2A—and home-first models, first trialled in 2016. The Coronavirus Act 2020 brought a relaxation of the duties around NHS continuing healthcare. This meant the assessment and organising of ongoing care taking place when people were back at home. The immediate utility of D2A became clear in spring 2020: 30,000 acute beds were freed up immediately. Although the longer-term benefit is more difficult to measure in the absence of publicly available data, anecdotally, Marie Curie and other organisations in the field report success.

There are grounds for optimism, too, in the anticipated shift to a more joined-up system of health and social care. Since I introduced my Bill 20 years ago, the main cause of delayed discharge appears to have shifted from local authorities to the NHS, but, wherever the block lies, the new ecosystem encourages collaboration through integrated care partnerships, with more accountability upwards where there has been very little in recent times.

Drawing all this together, my Bill, first, requires lead hospital clinicians to certify daily which of their patients are fit for discharge. Secondly, it defines delayed discharges as a delay of more than 48 hours beyond the date of the lead clinician's certificate. Thirdly, it establishes delayed discharge as a patient safety issue and includes it under the definition of a qualified incident for investigation by the health service's safety investigation body, established under health and care legislation. Fourthly, it requires local authorities to transfer to relevant NHS trusts the daily rate it pays for nursing home care for each delayed discharge day attributed by the health service's safety investigation body to a failure of social care at the point of the move. Fifthly, it transfers the aggregated delayed discharge levies back to social care centrally in a virtuous money circle. Sixthly, it requires delayed discharge data to be published in a league table of NHS trusts and integrated care partnerships every three months. Seventhly, it requires the Care Quality Commission to investigate the worst-performing decile in the league tables within three months of publication to specify the deadline for itemised remedial action, to identify the body or bodies on which actions are placed, and to report to the Secretary of State. Eighthly, the Bill would require integrated care partnerships to include delayed discharges as a standing agenda item.

Finally, Selma's Bill would have a special category of asterisked delayed discharge for those judged by lead clinicians to be entering their final days. People in this category, which will be reported on as a subset, will be subject to fast-tracking, so that we can speed the transfer of the most vulnerable from inappropriate acute settings to more appropriate, homey settings in the community.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Dr Andrew Murrison, Tracey Crouch, Nick Gibb, Steve Brine, Dr Luke Evans and Dr Caroline Johnson present the Bill.

Dr Andrew Murrison accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May, and to be printed (Bill 283).

Opposition Day

[16TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Refugees from Ukraine

12.51 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House once more condemns President Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine and the war crimes being perpetrated by the Russian state there; reiterates the House's solidarity with Ukrainians in their resistance to Russia's invasion of their sovereign state; recognises that Europe is now seeing the largest movement of refugees since the second world war, for whom the UK shares responsibility; warmly welcomes the significant and widespread offers of support for those fleeing the invasion from people and organisations across the UK; supports expansion of the family visa scheme and Homes for Ukraine scheme; and calls on the Government to go further and faster in its response, including waiving requirements for Ukrainians to apply for visas in advance of their arrival in the UK so as to facilitate speedy access to international protection here, working with international partners to ensure vulnerable people can be resettled here and providing full and sustained funding and safeguarding to support people to rebuild their lives.

It is a pleasure to move the motion, which is in my name and the name of my hon. Friends. President Putin's atrocities in Ukraine continue to shock and appal: there have been maternity wards and nurseries bombed; apartment blocks and underground shelters destroyed; civilians targeted; journalists killed; and vacuum bombs deployed. On the other hand, the courage and bravery of the Ukrainians—from President Zelensky to the young volunteers putting their life on the line for their people—never ceases to amaze.

We Scottish National party Members have supported, and continue to support, the work that the Government have done to assist Ukraine with its self-defence. We have supported—with constructive criticism—work on sanctions, and we look forward very much to the day when Putin faces the consequences of his outrageous aggression at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. However, today's debate focuses our attention on the victims of the invasion who have fled Putin's atrocities and are seeking sanctuary elsewhere. We are witnessing the largest movement of refugees in Europe since the second world war, and we share responsibility for sheltering them with our European allies.

Across the nations of the UK, people have opened their heart and are volunteering to open their home to these refugees. Over 120,000 people have already signed up for the Homes for Ukraine scheme. That is extraordinary, but not a surprise; public opinion is massively behind our meeting our responsibilities and welcoming those who are fleeing Putin's atrocities. Regrettably, we have been, and remain, disappointed and frustrated by the response from the Home Office, which we continue to regard as slow, piecemeal and too limited. While the public have opened their hearts and their homes, the Home Office has failed to open the door fast enough and wide enough to those fleeing Ukraine.

We hear talk of a humanitarian response, but in reality the Home Office is offering a managed migration response to the biggest refugee challenge this continent has faced for 80 years. The Home Office talks about unlimited numbers, but there are limits, not least because

of the bureaucracy, which will make access impossible for many. It made something like nine changes to its family scheme in the scheme's first 10 days. That does not seem like a Department that has been planning its response for months, in the light of intelligence that invasion was almost certain. Regret, frustration and anger has been evident right across the House, and in pretty much all corners of the media and beyond.

Of course, it is only right to acknowledge that there has been progress in recent days. We welcome the extensions to the family visa scheme; the announcement of the sponsorship scheme, though all sorts of questions around funding and safeguarding arise; and the work with the Welsh and Scottish Governments to enable them to act as super-sponsors. We hope that the move to online visa applications will help some.

This debate offers us a chance to probe further on the details of the schemes, and to suggest improvements. Most fundamentally, we urge the Government to think again about why they alone in Europe must ask those fleeing bombs and brutality to jump through the hoops and bureaucracy of gaining a visa before they can secure sanctuary here. None of our European neighbours requires Ukrainians to do that—neither those in the Schengen area nor our common travel area neighbours in Ireland. We Scottish National party Members support following their example, not only because we believe that that approach has huge public support, but because that is the right thing to do, and because we have been asked to do it by our Ukrainian friends.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I fully support the hon. Gentleman's motion and the way in which he is speaking to it. Obviously, I totally condemn the Russian actions in Ukraine; huge numbers of people are now forced to flee. Does he recognise, though, that many people from other parts of the world—Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Eritrea and elsewhere—are also seeking asylum or a place of safety, and should absolutely be treated the same as anybody else seeking refuge in this country? There should not be a rule that applies only to Ukraine, and not to people coming from other war-torn countries—wars that, in some cases, we are associated with, through our supply of arms to Saudi Arabia.

Stuart C. McDonald: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his question. What we have seen in Ukraine, and the response to it, raises all kinds of questions about the Government's approach to refugees more generally, and about the fact that this country can be, and wants to be, much more welcoming. It certainly poses questions about the Nationality and Borders Bill, which we will debate next week, and which I shall come to shortly.

As we have heard in numerous Question Times and debates, the requirement to seek a visa is causing distress, upset and fury among those caught up in these processes. I have no doubt that we will hear that again today, from Members from across the House.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a very good and useful speech. One of the people facing frustrations is my constituent Valentyna, who has been a British citizen for 17 years. She wants to bring her family to safety in Glasgow, but she feels as though her family are going round in circles in Poland and not getting anywhere with regard to visas, and they

have nowhere to stay. Does my hon. Friend agree that this delay is causing much distress to people in Poland, Ukraine and Scotland?

Stuart C. McDonald: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Every Member of this House will almost certainly have constituents who have faced similar battles. Newspapers report people speaking of “A humiliating process”; of being

“tied up by Home Office red tape”;

and of the

“trauma of UK visa processing”.

Moving the process online will hopefully make things easier for some, as I say, but “online” is not necessarily “straightforward” or “fast”. The Government are still telling the women and children who are fleeing bombs and brutality to use a smartphone to: complete a complicated online form in English; upload documents that prove that they were resident in Ukraine before the invasion, and that prove a family relationship; and wait for a decision. Meanwhile, the sparse and subcontracted visa application centres are not set up to cope with the many who still need their services. Hours are too limited and the centres are spread too far apart. There is talk of surging staff, and many staff are no doubt working hard, but they have been handed an impossible task.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will join me in asking the Minister when exactly the application system will allow applications to be made in Ukrainian, as we were promised a week or so ago would be possible.

Stuart C. McDonald: That is a very good question, and one that we touched on in the Home Affairs Committee this morning, but it would be useful to hear again from the Minister, from the Dispatch Box, about the work being taken forward.

Staff in visa centres face an impossible task. Worse still, there are persistent reports of some subcontractors charging fees for appointments outside business hours, or for uploading documents. The Government knew that was a problem; the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration recently reported that subcontractors’

“sole focus is income generation. The human aspect is not at all valued”.

The pantomime about processes in France was also an absolute farce. At the rate we are going, it will be months until we play our part properly.

We are three weeks on from Putin’s first escalation of the conflict in Ukraine, and around a fortnight on from the launch of the family scheme, and as I understand it, 5,500 visas have been granted, but that is in the region of 0.18% of the number of people who have fled Ukraine—and the UK’s population is 15% of that of the EU.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving voice to our many constituents who want a compassionate and expansive humanitarian response. Certainly, in Northern Ireland, many people see that just a few miles south, the Republic of Ireland is offering a broad-based welcome. People in Northern Ireland are dismayed that they are unable to give practical support. They see efforts to achieve the society that we want being thwarted again by the UK Government’s

policy. The hon. Gentleman mentions processing issues; does he agree that those issues highlight the culture of “no” that exists in the Home Office? That culture has prevented people around the world who are fleeing conflicts from making a new life here—from being able to work, and from receiving the sanctuary that most of our constituents want them to receive.

Stuart C. McDonald: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I think that a lot of this is tied up with Home Office culture. She is right to raise the Irish example, which I will come to in a moment.

At this rate of progress, it will be many months before we get even close to the 100,000 that the Prime Minister first spoke about, never mind the subsequent 200,000 that he has referred to. This is an acute crisis that is happening now, and we need to be meeting our responsibilities now, not a few months down the line. On the Irish example, Ireland has taken almost 7,000 already. I am not saying that because this is some sort of competition to see who can take in the most Ukrainians. I am pointing it out because it illustrates precisely the impact that visa restrictions are having. The United Kingdom is 13 times bigger than Ireland and has a Ukrainian diaspora that is larger by a similar magnitude, but three weeks in, we have granted refuge to and welcomed a smaller number. The difference is that we require visas and the Irish do not.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Just to be clear, is the hon. Gentleman saying that there should not be any checks at all? Does he not share the concern that some people in this country might on the face of it look very welcoming but would actually do harm to people coming over here? Would he just consider that he might be the first to object if that eventuality were to occur?

Stuart C. McDonald: Nobody on these Benches is suggesting that no checks should be required. I will come to that later in my speech. The Irish carry out checks on people coming in, although I do not have the details of how they arrange the accommodation thereafter. Nobody is suggesting that this should be a check-free or security-free process.

Iryna Terlecky of the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain told the Home Affairs Committee that

“it is quite an indictment of the system and how it is working that everybody needs an immigration lawyer, and this is just for family members coming over”.

That is why we believe that the requirement for a visa should be waived. We simply do not have the infrastructure to process them fast enough. The Ukrainian ambassador, whom we recently welcomed into this Chamber with a well-deserved standing ovation, said to the Home Affairs Committee on lifting visa requirements:

“We will be happy if all the barriers are dropped for some period of time when we can get the maximum of people. Then we will deal with that, and my embassy is here to help: to organise for those people”.

These calls are supported by the Governments of Scotland and Wales, as well as by numerous organisations here including the Refugee Council, the Scottish Refugee Council, the Immigration Law Practitioners Association,

[*Stuart C. McDonald*]

the Red Cross and many more. They also have public support, with one recent poll showing 60% in favour of, and just 15% opposed to scrapping the visa requirements.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) pointed out during Monday night's petition debate on a similar subject, not requiring an advance visa for someone travelling here is far from a novel idea. Many thousands of people arrive in the UK each and every day without having obtained a visa in advance. Around 90 countries operate this system, from Brazil to Botswana and Malaysia to Mexico, as well as the whole European Union. Many people will have biometric passports and many will not, but the border functions smoothly enough. That does not mean there are no security checks. We run checks on advance passenger information provided by the companies bringing people in on ferries, trains and planes, and there are checks at the border. Biometrics can still be taken, by using apps for those who can, by reusing biometrics for people who have been here before, or by doing the biometrics at the border on or after arrival. And as the ambassador said, we will have the assistance of the Ukrainian Government in doing the checks.

Salisbury has been invoked in this Chamber, but while that illustrates what Putin is capable of, it has nothing to do with visas. Neither in that outrageous attack nor in the murder of Alexander Litvinenko was there any requirement for the murderers to use anything other than a Russian passport with a false identity and to seek a visa for the UK directly. The security concerns that we have heard about are hard to pin down. In the reports of the Home Secretary's embarrassing representations to Ireland, reference was made to briefings about gangs. Here, Ministers have spoken about "false documents". Other briefings have blamed No. 10 for blocking Home Office proposals to simply waive visa requirements. If that is so, the Home Office was clearly not overly concerned about the security challenges that have repeatedly been referenced. None of these concerns can be ignored, but in the grand scheme of things the Home Office has done nothing to persuade me or my colleagues—or, I suspect, Members right across the House—that security justifies keeping those fleeing persecution at arm's length, potentially for months on end.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): As usual, my hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Is he aware of the views of Lord Peter Ricketts, the former national security adviser, who has said that because the majority of refugees coming to this country are women and children, we should take

"a much more humane and open approach...and should not be requiring visas"

and that we should do the security checks after they get here? Is my hon. Friend anxious, as I am, to hear from those on the Government Front Bench why they think Lord Peter Ricketts is wrong?

Stuart C. McDonald: I agree with my hon. and learned Friend. I know that she made a similar point in Monday night's debate, and that she is still waiting for a response to those concerns. We expect to hear that response today.

At the end of the day, we are not the ones asking the Government to do anything wild or outlandish. It is the Government who are asking us to go along with a policy that is totally out of kilter with that of our neighbours and with public opinion and that does not meet the urgent humanitarian challenge that we face today. I very much fear that we will regret it if we do not waive these visa requirements, and we should encourage the Government today to take action on that.

As the motion states, we welcome the further extension to the family scheme and the launch of the sponsorship scheme. I know that hon. Members will have a million questions to ask about them, some of which we were helpfully able to put directly to the Minister this morning. I will briefly touch on just a couple. As I argued this morning, I see no reason why many thousands of Ukrainians who are here on time-limited visas should be excluded from bringing relatives in on the family scheme, whether they are students, workers or visitors. There will be particular issues for seasonal agricultural workers in accessing even the sponsorship scheme, given the accommodation that they are generally provided with. I welcome the fact that Lord Harrington told the Committee this morning that he would give that matter his consideration, because we could be talking about 10% to 20% of the Ukrainian diaspora here being in that very situation and still struggling to be joined by any family at all. It is important that we resolve that.

We must also resolve the issues around people's leave to remain here as early as possible, preferably matching it to the leave to remain that people coming in are being offered, rather than giving them just a few months until the end of the year. There are other questions about the nature of the leave to remain that people are being offered and about what happens at the end of the three years. There are questions about the safeguarding and protection of vulnerable people entering on the sponsored route. What happens if a sponsorship breaks down? What happens at the end of the six months? Colleagues will speak in much more detail about these points, but we offer our questions and criticisms constructively, because we all want to see these schemes work.

As I have said, our fundamental disagreements with the Government are over their stance that visas should still be required at all. Our other fundamental disagreement is about the Nationality and Borders Bill, which will come back to this House next week when we will debate the Lords amendments to it. That legislation is predicated on a totally misguided belief that refugees must always seek asylum in the first safe country, and that those who do not must be criminalised, offshored and stripped of their rights to family life and public funds. This last month illustrates as never before in the starkest terms the importance and relevance of the refugee convention, 70 years on, and also how the anti-refugee Bill is simply not fit for purpose. We will be constructive critics wherever we can, but on those two fundamental points we are absolutely clear: scrap visas for Ukrainians, and scrap the anti-refugee Bill.

1.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Tom Pursglove): I welcome this debate and the opportunity it provides for a constructive and pragmatic discussion in the House this afternoon. Russia's attack on Ukraine is both monstrous and

unjustified. We are united across this House in horror at the unfolding situation, and the entire country stands with the brave people of Ukraine. They are an inspiration to us all. This Government recognise that Europe is now seeing the largest movement of refugees since the second world war. We recognise the urgency of what is a rapidly evolving situation, and in response we have doubled down on our resolve to help those Ukrainians who want to come to the UK to escape the conflict in their homeland.

We are taking comprehensive action, including opening two new visa routes and adapting existing processes, making it easier and safer to bring Ukrainians swiftly and securely to the United Kingdom. We are creating safe and legal routes for Ukrainian nationals coming to the UK. Earlier this month, we announced our bespoke Ukraine family scheme, which significantly expanded the ability of British nationals and Ukrainian nationals settled in the UK to enable family members to join them in this country. The scheme went live on 4 March and, as of 4 pm on 15 March, has already seen 39,000 applications started and 20,000 being submitted, resulting in 5,500 visas being issued at this point.

As well as immediate family members, we have extended eligibility for this scheme to adult parents, grandparents, children over 18, siblings, aunts and uncles, nephews, nieces, cousins and in-laws, as well as all their immediate family members.

Alison Thewliss: The Minister has set out the number of applications that have been made, completed and processed. Can he tell me the timescale for the completion of all those that have not yet been processed?

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I would expect to see a real surge in the numbers of applications being granted. That is something we all very much want to see. I think that is likely to happen within the space of the next week or so. We are working tirelessly on this, and I place on record my thanks, gratitude and appreciation for Home Office staff and the case working teams who are working day and night to do this work with the urgency that it rightly warrants, and that we as Members of this House and our constituents across the country expect.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): A couple of weeks ago I, again through the Home Office and others, helped a family to arrive in Northwich in my constituency—Hannah, her daughter Viktoria and her six-year-old daughter Anastasia. They would say to Ministers, as they certainly said to me, that the process for visas is far too cumbersome. They are 50-page forms. I know the Minister will have heard this from Members right across the House, but we certainly need to move forward on that.

Tom Pursglove: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the work he has been doing as a constituency MP in aiding his constituents to come across to the United Kingdom. I hope I can give him a little bit of reassurance by saying that we are working tirelessly to simplify those processes. I know the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) asked specifically about translation; on the translation of those web forms, I can tell her that work is going on at pace to provide translation of the

appropriate guidance to help people to complete those forms in both Russian and Ukrainian. I hope that answers her point.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Given that the United Nations is reporting that some 3 million people have fled Ukraine over the past number of weeks, half of them children, is 5,500 really something to crow about? Why can the Government not get a move on with this, allow people to get to safety, do the security checks when they are here and speed up the process so that more people are brought to a safe place out of the horrendous crisis they face?

Tom Pursglove: The hon. Gentleman speaks with great passion about these matters. I have set out some detail about the work that is going on to speed up those processes, and I will come on to greater detail about that in my remarks. One point that it is important to place firmly on the record is that, in relation to children, particularly unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, there are sensitivities involved. It is obviously very important that all the right safeguarding checks and processes are in place.

I also recognise that there are issues here where we need the agreement of the Ukrainian Government, to ensure that we are working in lockstep with them to get this right. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will recognise why that is crucial.

Drew Hendry: I am grateful to the Minister for taking a further intervention on this point. He talks correctly about safeguarding. Nobody is suggesting there should not be safeguarding for children; it is absolutely critical that children are safe—but children must be safe. Cannot the children be safe first, and then we do the safeguarding? Can we not speed up the process so that the checks are done when children are in a safe place—as opposed to an unsafe place, which many are in at the moment?

Tom Pursglove: To illustrate the point I was making for the hon. Gentleman's benefit, I repeat that it is important that we have agreement with Ukraine on how those matters are approached. It would not be right, for example, for us to remove unaccompanied children from Poland without that agreement in place. Of course, as he would rightly expect, and because it is something that we as Ministers are very mindful of, we will continue to work constructively with the Ukrainian and Polish authorities to ensure that we get it right and that we do our bit on this.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On that point, surely if there is an unaccompanied child in Poland, say, we would want that child looked after safely in Poland so that it can reunite with its parents when they are free to escape Ukraine. What are the Government doing to support bordering countries with humanitarian aid for that purpose?

Tom Pursglove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that particular perspective on this issue, and I will happily have a further discussion with him outside the Chamber about the constructive work we are doing with the Polish authorities in particular. It is important, where possible, that we help to provide appropriate

[Tom Pursglove]

humanitarian assistance in the region. Of course, as he rightly says, wherever possible we want to see families reunited as quickly as possible, and there is an argument that having those children cared for closer to home makes it easier to facilitate that, but we will keep that under constant review to ensure that we are doing everything we can as a country to support those unaccompanied children and see that they are properly cared for. That is something people in our country would rightly expect.

Returning to the Ukraine family scheme, we have ensured that the scheme is easily accessible and fee free, and that it will not include any salary or language requirements. People who successfully apply to the scheme will have three years' leave to remain and can work and access public services during that time. We will ensure that there will be avenues for people to stay if they are unable to return. We will never seek to return those to whom we give shelter if the situation in Ukraine remains as dangerous as it is today.

Liz Saville Roberts: One thing drawn to my attention by my constituent Gareth Roberts, who is presently travelling with his wife Nataliia and her daughter and granddaughter, Angelina and Albina, is whether the Government will consider onward travel funding for Ukrainian refugees arriving in the United Kingdom, as has been provided by other nations in the EU.

Tom Pursglove: I will gladly take that point away and raise it with the noble Lord Harrington, who, as the right hon. Lady will recognise, has assumed his new role in the past few days. I am sure he will be looking at the package of support we are providing in the round and will want to make a judgment on whether that would be an appropriate form of support that we could offer. I am keen to do that and, if she would like to write with further details, I will gladly ensure that that letter reaches him.

On biometrics, we are ensuring that the process of applying to the scheme is as straightforward as possible. To further support the Ukrainian people, holders of valid Ukrainian passports who are outside the UK and making applications under the Ukraine family scheme will no longer be required to provide their biometric information at a visa application centre before they travel. Instead, they will be able to make the application entirely online.

The Ukraine family scheme applications will continue to be assessed as a priority. Once applications have been processed, individuals will receive a permission letter enabling them to travel to the UK and will not be required to collect a vignette in their passport. Applicants who hold identity cards and do not have a valid passport will still need to attend a visa application centre in person and provide their biometric information.

As the House is aware, the Home Secretary has also announced plans for a new sponsored route for Ukrainians with no ties to the UK to come here, and the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will set out further details as soon as he is able. The scheme is the latest in a package of humanitarian support to help the Ukrainian people and has been brought forward following extensive discussion with the

Ukrainian leaders and other countries in the region. This uncapped route allows individuals and organisations, including businesses, charities and NGOs, to welcome Ukrainians to the UK. As our Homes for Ukraine webpage sets out, if someone has a residential spare room or separate self-contained accommodation that is unoccupied, please come forward.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am pleased to hear that we are going to make these efforts to ensure that any Ukrainian who wants to come here to live safely can get here. Will there also be a package of support for local authorities to provide the necessary back-up services? Clearly educational and mental health support will be needed, as well as all kinds of community support, and local authorities are best placed to deliver that.

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the spirit in which he comes at this issue. I can provide him with reassurance that there will be £10,500 of support for local authorities per individual refugee supported, to provide exactly the sorts of services that he has identified as being so important—school places and support for health provision and mental health provision—recognising the huge trauma that many of these individuals will have been through in recent days and weeks. We want to help ensure we do as much as we can in communities, properly supporting people to address those needs and challenges.

Huw Merriman: I apologise to the Minister, because this is specific. He mentioned individuals who have a spare room and the Homes for Ukraine scheme. In my constituency, a GP is looking to sponsor a lady and her 12-year-old child. In such a situation, does that require two rooms, or will one room suffice? I know that is specific, but if the Minister knows the answer, I would love to hear it and take it back to the GP.

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point in some detail. It is probably best for me to take that point away as a pragmatic illustration of the sorts of challenges that we will have to address in the coming weeks in delivering this scheme. That is exactly the sort of issue we want to ensure is picked up as part of the announcements that I have alluded to and that I expect to be made in relatively short order. A proper answer to that will then hopefully help to unlock opportunities to provide support and sanctuary for someone in his community. I am very grateful to his constituents for their keen engagement in these matters.

Alison Thewliss: The Minister is being very generous in giving way. We have many questions that are often best asked directly to him, so I thank him for that. In a circumstance where someone in Glasgow perhaps knows someone in Ukraine and wants to host them, how do they go about that process to make sure that they can say to the system that exists, "I have a room. I know a person"? How does that person then get to Glasgow to take up that room and that offer of generous support?

Tom Pursglove: From Friday, individuals will be able to come forward and where they have that existing relationship or an individual they particularly want to support, they will be able to provide that information to aid with the matching process. There are huge advantages to using those existing relationships and synergies, and

that system will go live on Friday. I hope that answers the question and provides the reassurance that the hon. Lady is looking for. I thank the constituent she has in mind for the work they are willing to do and the support they are keen to provide to those individuals, which I know will be of huge value and will be massively appreciated by all concerned.

The accommodation must be available for at least six months, be fit for people to live in and be suitable for the number of people to be accommodated. The response of the British public has been overwhelming. More than 100,000 people have expressed interest in sponsoring, and that number is going up all the time. We are engaging with local authorities on the development of the scheme to ensure that those expressing an interest in sponsoring an individual or family understand the process and our expectations.

We will ensure that those who want to sponsor an individual or family can volunteer and be matched quickly with Ukrainians in need, working closely with local authorities across the country. We know that charities, faith groups, universities and other organisations have already reached out to those leaving Ukraine. We will be working closely with them to ensure that people who want to help are matched to Ukrainians in need. We will also work closely with international partners to ensure that displaced Ukrainians forced to flee their homes are supported to apply.

Phase 1 of the scheme will open on Friday 18 March for visa applications from Ukrainians who have named people willing to sponsor them. People or organisations wanting to be sponsors who do not personally know anyone fleeing Ukraine can now record their interest. They will then be kept updated as the scheme develops. We believe that for those eligible, our offer is comparable in generosity to that proposed under the EU's temporary protection directive.

Mike Amesbury: I just have a quick practical question about the matching process. How will that be done for this scheme?

Tom Pursglove: There has been a little commentary around this matter, including at the Home Affairs Committee session this morning. It is fair to say that one important strand of work in getting this right is working intensively with NGOs to develop the system in the most appropriate and streamlined way. We have touched on the safeguarding issues in the course of this debate, and we will want to get those right as this is rolled out, but it is fair to say that further, imminent announcements will provide more detail on the specific point the hon. Gentleman raises. I think he will welcome the work going on with NGOs, which have real expertise and experience with these issues, to develop this scheme so that it is the very best it can be from the very start.

We hear the offers from the devolved Administrations. Our colleagues at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will be working with them to ensure that individuals and organisations that want to sponsor an individual or family can volunteer to do so. Local authorities will play a crucial role in the delivery of the Homes for Ukraine scheme and in support for Ukrainian beneficiaries, including on integration, English language support, health, education, employment and housing.

Alongside the generous offer of accommodation that sponsors will be making, we are providing a substantial level of funding to local authorities to enable them to provide wider support to families to rebuild their lives and fully integrate into our communities. For those arriving via the Homes for Ukraine scheme, we will provide a substantial level of funding, at a rate of £10,500 a person, to local authorities, as I touched on earlier. There will be an additional top-up for child education to enable them to provide much wider support for families to rebuild their lives and fully integrate into our communities. Further details will be shared shortly.

As stated by the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary, we will not be issuing blanket visa waivers in response to this crisis. The visa process is vital, not only to keeping British citizens safe, but to ensuring that we are helping those in genuine need. We are already seeing people presenting false documents, claiming to be Ukrainians. Because of that, security and biometrics checks remain a fundamental part of our visa process, and that is consistent with our approach to the evacuation of Afghanistan.

Stuart C. McDonald: What I do not understand is why this is any different for the many thousands of peoples who come into this country every single day without a visa. People will try to present false documents for those nationalities, too, but we have border guards for that very purpose. What is the specific risk? It seems incredibly difficult to pin down.

Tom Pursglove: I know that the hon. Gentleman feels passionately about this particular point. In response, I cannot say too much on the Floor of the House, for obvious reasons, but people would rightly expect the Government to act in accordance with the security advice we receive at any given point in time and to do so responsibly. I also make the point, touching again on a point that we have been discussing this afternoon, that there is a safeguarding issue in relation to travel to this country. We will obviously want to know who vulnerable children and adults are travelling with and ensure that they are kept safe, because that is an absolute imperative. That is the position of this Government.

Joanna Cherry: On the security issue, the Minister will have heard my intervention earlier, citing the views of Lord Peter Ricketts, a former National Security Adviser, that visa-free access could be safely afforded and that the biometric and security checks could be done largely once women and children Ukrainian refugees arrive here. Why is Lord Ricketts wrong? I tried to get an answer on that from the Minister's colleague, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), on Monday without success. I need one today, please.

Tom Pursglove: I never like to disappoint the hon. and learned Lady in my answers, but clearly, we have to act in accordance with the latest up-to-date advice that we receive, which is precisely what we are doing. Of course we have been looking at, and will continue to look at, how those processes can be expedited as far as possible. We have been consistently clear about the position in relation to visa waivers and the checks. That is the position as it stands at this point.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Is the Minister saying that the UK is receiving different security advice from all those European countries and our near neighbours Ireland, or is he saying that they are putting their people at risk?

Tom Pursglove: Again, I make the point that we have to act in accordance with the advice that we receive. I am simply not in a position to pass meaningful comment on the advice that other Governments may or may not be receiving. Of course there are marked differences between the United Kingdom and many of our European friends, in the sense that we are not part of Schengen and they are. That is a considerable difference that is materially relevant when we discuss these matters.

Huw Merriman: Perhaps I can pass on some advice that I received from a constituent who is Ukrainian. She made it clear to me that if her former partner, who domestically abused her, ended up in this country because we did not do any checks, she would hold me personally accountable. Does the Minister not think that she also deserves respect? We absolutely have to look after people. We cannot just talk about domestic abuse in this place and then ignore it when there is a greater cause—that is wrong.

Tom Pursglove: It is fair to say that Ministers in government have at the forefront of their minds, as my hon. Friend does, all our safeguarding responsibilities, of which the British people would rightly expect us to be conscious and mindful, and to act in accordance with them.

Stuart C. McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

Tom Pursglove: I have been very generous, but I will give way to the hon. Gentleman one last time.

Stuart C. McDonald: I apologise to the Minister, because in a sense I am making a point to the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) rather than to the Minister. We do checks on thousands of people who come in every day from countries that do not require a visa—from the whole European Union and all the countries that I listed earlier. We do criminal record checks on the advance passenger information that we get; we do not need a visa to do those checks. We are not saying, “Let in any old person from Ukraine.” We should do the check at the border with the advance passenger information; we do not need a visa process to do that.

Tom Pursglove: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. The fact is that I would like to think that we all recognise the lengths to which the Kremlin regime is willing to go, as we saw vividly in relation to Salisbury. We are incredibly mindful of that. We are simply not willing to take chances with the UK’s national security and we are acting in accordance with the advice.

I suspect that if that sort of issue were to be repeated in this country—it is unthinkable—the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues would understandably ask us why we had allowed that to happen needlessly. We simply cannot take that chance. I add that nothing that we are doing is inconsistent with the approach that Canada and the

United States—our Five Eyes colleagues—are taking. They are adopting similar arrangements on biometrics and security checks.

We believe that we are offering a substantial package that will enable the British public and the Ukrainian diaspora to play their part in supporting displaced Ukrainians into the United Kingdom. We keep our support under constant review and our new routes will continue to respond, develop and keep pace with the rapidly shifting situation on the ground. I certainly welcome hearing further contributions from right hon. and hon. Members during the debate and I will of course reflect on the suggestions and ideas that are put forward.

I am hugely proud of the big-hearted and generous reaction that we have seen from the British people in response to the crisis. In response, as a Government, we have developed a comprehensive package to mobilise those offers in reality. This is a whole United Kingdom effort with Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England coming together in solidarity to show our support for the Ukrainian people. We are not just talking about it; our actions will match our words. Together, I know that we will deliver.

1.34 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): There are turning points in history when the constant struggle between freedom and tyranny comes down to one fight in one place. In 1940, that fight took place in the skies above Britain. Today, 82 years later, it is taking place in the forests, fields and war-torn towns and cities of Ukraine. Today we pay tribute to President Zelensky, who has stood strong and resolute in these dark times in the face of Vladimir Putin’s senseless war of choice.

Volodymyr Zelensky is without doubt the leader of the free world, and the bravery, dignity and defiance of the Ukrainian people will never be forgotten. They have not yet won this war, but let us make no mistake: they will eventually triumph over the forces of darkness that have invaded their country. When they do, the United Kingdom and every other democracy across the world will be forever in debt to the heroes of the Ukrainian resistance.

The courage and fortitude of the Ukrainian people stands in stark contrast to the mean-spirited and inept way in which the Home Secretary has responded to the crisis. We should not be surprised by that, however, as the utter shambles of the last few weeks is simply part of a pattern of behaviour. From the Windrush scandal to the small boats crisis, and from the Nationality and Borders Bill to the response to Putin’s barbaric assault on Ukraine, we are witnessing a Government Department whose approach is defined by a toxic combination of incompetence and indifference.

We have had to endure the embarrassing spectacle of the Home Secretary contradicting her own Department’s announcement on the number of visas granted, and then compounding the confusion by claiming that an application centre for Ukrainians had been opened in Calais when that was patently not the case. While I commend the Immigration Minister for deleting the tweet in which he suggested that Ukrainians fleeing the horrors of war should apply for fruit picker visas, I nevertheless repeat my request that he apologise for that

tweet, as it is clear that such an apology would go a long way to reassuring the public that the Government have grasped the horrific reality of the situation.

A Government who fail to plan are a Government who plan to fail. Vladimir Putin has been showing the world for years that he is a war-mongering gangster who will stop at nothing in his relentless campaign to crush democracy and the rule of law. From the assassination of Alexander Litvinenko to the invasion of Georgia, and from butchery in Syria to the illegal annexation of Crimea and the state-sponsored hit on the Skripals, Mr Putin's track record of murder and mayhem since he came to power is not exactly a state secret.

Putin has been massing his troops on the Ukrainian border since October last year. That is five months that the Home Secretary could have used to put plans in place for every possible scenario, so that if an exodus were to be triggered by an invasion, we would have had a well-organised and effective response ready to roll out. Instead, we have seen the Government scrambling, making policy on the hoof and constantly being on the back foot.

As a consequence of that basic failure to plan and prepare, we have witnessed the Government having to perform U-turns on an almost-daily basis. First, the Home Secretary said that the family reunion scheme would be open only to dependants, thus preventing Ukrainians in this country from bringing in their elderly parents, grandparents or extended family. We on the Opposition Benches protested, and the Home Office grudgingly extended it to parents and adult children. We protested again, and the Government finally relented, so thankfully all extended family members are now included in the scope of the family reunion route.

Then the Home Secretary was insisting on Ukrainians with passports and family in the UK having to wait for days in visa application centres rather than applying online and doing the biometric checks here in the UK. Again we protested and again the Home Secretary was forced to U-turn. It took weeks of pressure to force the Government to set up a scheme for Ukrainians who do not have family connections in the UK.

While I am on the subject of the Homes for Ukraine scheme, the fact that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has been given responsibility for it speaks volumes, because it is a clear signal that the Prime Minister has completely lost confidence in the Home Secretary.

Tom Pursglove: Would the hon. Gentleman not find it odd if the Department responsible for housing were not responsible for trying to provide housing for vulnerable people?

Stephen Kinnock: The vast majority of the issues that need to be resolved around bringing Ukrainians into this country are clearly to do with immigration. The fact that this brief has been shifted is a clear indication that the Prime Minister has lost confidence in the Home Secretary.

Liz Saville Roberts: Does the hon. Gentleman share my confusion about that comment by the Minister, given that the Home Secretary was responsible for putting refugees in deeply unsuitable circumstances in Penally camp in Pembrokeshire, which has since had to be closed?

Stephen Kinnock: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right. Operation Warm Welcome, the scheme for Afghans, has completely stalled and thousands of Afghans are stuck in hotels. That was completely on the watch of this Home Secretary, so I will take no lectures on that from the Government Members.

Mr Bone: I say to the shadow Minister that the SNP has moved the motion sensibly, criticising the Government in a constructive way. The shadow Minister's remarks are in danger of turning into a more party political attack. May I suggest that that is not what the House wants at the moment?

Stephen Kinnock: I remind the hon. Gentleman that what is going on in Ukraine is a fight for democracy. In this House we act on the basis of democracy; it is the Opposition's duty to hold the Government to account and to scrutinise them. If I were saying these things in Russia right now, I would be carted out and sent to the gulag, so I will take no lectures from him on the purpose of this debate and on our purpose, as Her Majesty's loyal Opposition, in a democracy. This House has lost confidence in the Home Secretary and, frankly, the entire country has too.

I turn now to the day-to-day misery and chaos that Ukrainians seeking sanctuary in our country are experiencing. We are still hearing stories from Ukrainians who have made it to Poland, Hungary and other bordering countries that they are having to wait for days on end to be granted a UK visa. Given that we know that it takes only 10 minutes for a biometric test to be completed and only a matter of minutes to print a visa, why on earth are people having to wait for so long? As one Ukrainian refugee on the Polish border said, "It was hell". Another called it "a humiliating process".

This incompetence is leaving a stain on our international reputation. Have these poor people not dealt with enough stress already? We have also heard that the visa centre in northern France was originally supposed to be in Calais, then Lille, and that now it will be in Arras, another 30 miles from Lille. If the Home Office cannot even decide where the visa centre will be, how on earth will the people on the ground know where to go?

Let us not forget that the Home Secretary cited security concerns as the explanation for her refusal to set up a visa centre in Calais, while we have a Prime Minister who repeatedly overruled the advice of our security services in awarding a peerage to the son of a KGB agent. That tells us all we need to know about the priorities of this Government.

I turn to the Homes for Ukraine scheme that was announced on Monday. As I mentioned earlier in my remarks, Labour managed to shame the Government into introducing a sponsorship scheme to allow those without family to come to our country. It is a matter of profound regret that the Government have not heeded our calls for a simple emergency visa scheme that would have avoided the huge amount of bureaucracy, uncertainty and red tape that they have chosen to introduce. Nevertheless, this scheme is better than nothing.

However, on Monday the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities stood at the Dispatch Box and bellowed at the top of his voice about being fed up with people saying that the British people are not generous. His histrionics were yet another example of

[Stephen Kinnock]

the deeply disingenuous behaviour of Conservative Ministers who come to this Chamber and deliberately misrepresent the Opposition's criticisms of their dismal performance. Nobody is criticising the public for lack of generosity; our criticisms are levelled directly at this Government who have utterly failed the Ukrainians who are fleeing the horrors of war. If Ministers were to spend half as much time actually getting on with their jobs as they do desperately deploying smoke and mirrors to conceal their failings, then we might all be in a better place.

Mike Amesbury: Is the visa application not still a fundamental flaw in the Homes for Ukraine scheme? The considerable bureaucracy of a 50-page form will still be required. That really needs to be dealt with, and soon.

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The bureaucracy of a 50-page form could so easily be cut through if the Government were to heed our calls for an emergency visa scheme. The bureaucracy being imposed on these poor people who are feeling the horrors of war should shame us all.

Arguably, the most serious design fault in the Homes for Ukraine scheme is that people who wish to support Ukrainians must track them down themselves. My hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities rightly described this as a "DIY asylum scheme" that risks leaving refugees without refuge. Are the Government seriously suggesting that Ukrainians fleeing the horrors of war should advertise themselves on social media or that Brits who are happy to offer their spare rooms should be searching on Instagram for Ukrainian families to sponsor? Will the Minister commit today to the Government's implementing a pairing system to help sponsors find Ukrainian refugees who wish to come here?

We can only speculate on why the Home Secretary has chosen to burden those fleeing the horrors of war with the confusion and chaos that we have seen. Is she simply incompetent or is she being driven by the hostile-environment ideology that has propelled her to the upper echelons of the Conservative party? Only the Home Secretary can answer that question, but whatever her motivations the shambolic consequences are plain to see.

I began my speech by saying that there are moments in history when the great struggle between freedom and tyranny comes down to one fight, and I say today, without an iota of doubt, that freedom will win the day. Until that victory comes, we must do all we can to offer safe sanctuary to those Ukrainians who have made the perilous journey from their war-torn homeland.

As we have all seen, the Ukrainians are a passionately patriotic people and they will be utterly focused on returning home to rebuild their lives and their country as soon as the enemy has been defeated and expelled. In the meantime, they need to be treated with dignity and respect, but instead the Home Secretary's response has been mean spirited, short sighted and shambolic.

Stuart C. McDonald: I agree with much of what the shadow Minister has said, but can he be clear that Labour's position is not to waive visa requirements

altogether? How can he be so certain that the emergency visa he describes will resolve waiting times and bureaucracy? Why does he not join the SNP in calling for waiving visa requirements altogether?

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Gentleman is right that we are not suggesting that security checks be waived. We are making it clear that those security checks should take place in the United Kingdom when people have got here. The emergency visa has a rapid application process. On that basis, people would come into the UK and the biometric checks would take place here.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is saying that Labour would have the checks in the UK. What would happen if somebody failed the checks when they were already in the UK? Would they be deported? How would they be dealt with if they failed those checks?

Stephen Kinnock: That is a matter for Border Force. They would take the action that they take with any individual who enters this country and does not pass the security checks. It would be exactly the same as any other person who fails security checks; it is very simple and not rocket science.

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

Stephen Kinnock: Traumatized people, whose lives have been turned upside down, are being pushed from pillar to post and having the door to our country slammed in their faces by this Home Secretary. This is a profoundly unserious Government who are led by profoundly unserious people; what a contrast with the bravery of the Ukrainians and the warmth and generosity of the British people. The British people have stepped up and now it is time for the Government to catch up.

The Minister, hon. Members and right hon. Members from across this House are today calling on the Government to put people before paperwork. The British people are urging the Government to get a grip so that we can once again be confident in our proud record as a nation of sanctuary.

1.49 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is traditional to thank the previous speaker for their remarks, but regrettably I can find little on which I agree with the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), and I fear his tone was wrong.

Richard Graham: The point I wanted to make to the shadow Minister is that the reason the Government Benches are not as highly populated as many people, including in the media, might expect for a debate on refugees from Ukraine is that over 150 colleagues are currently in Committee Room 14 listening to and engaging with four female MPs from Ukraine. I have to say that all four of them have paid considerable tribute to the enormous support that this country and our Government have given their country, which is wonderful to hear, and I sometimes wonder whether we are living in a slightly different parallel world down here compared with up there.

Mr Bone: I thank my hon. Friend for a very important intervention. I would not criticise the Opposition for not having Members on their Benches because, for various reasons, a number of things relating to Ukraine are going on today.

I have a great deal of respect for the shadow Minister, but I just think he got it wrong on this occasion, and I absolutely think that the deputy leader of the Labour party, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), got it wrong at Prime Minister's questions. She lost the House, and she was making party political points. In contrast, the SNP parliamentary leader made a very constructive point, and the way SNP Members have introduced this debate is wholly constructive. They disagree with the Government on the level of support and the way refugees are handled, but they have done it constructively, and I could fully support most of the motion they have tabled. I have to say that I have said that before I hear what the Back-Bench SNP Members say, but I do think they have chosen this subject and put down a motion that is reasonable and constructive, even if I do not agree with absolutely all of it.

I want to congratulate the Prime Minister on his leadership across Europe on the Ukrainian crisis. I think people recognise that he has put in a lot of energy and has galvanised support for sanctions. Our military support to Ukraine has been huge, and our humanitarian support to the countries bordering Ukraine is probably the most in Europe. I think that is important testimony to how well this Government have done.

I think there is a very important point about looking after refugees, mainly women and children, who are fleeing Ukraine and getting out of Ukraine to the bordering countries, and who will want to be looked after there until the Russians can be defeated in Ukraine and they can then go back to their loved ones in Ukraine. I think we should do everything we can to help those countries, and I congratulate all the countries bordering Ukraine on the support they have given people who have either come from a warzone, with all the trauma they are facing there, or are fleeing in advance of the war coming towards them. I think we should give great credit to our European neighbours for that, and the fact that we are giving massive humanitarian aid is very important.

I want to deal in particular with the issue of human trafficking. I chaired the all-party group on human trafficking for a number of years, and these evil gangs—"evil gangs" does not do justice to how awful these people are—have moved into the areas to which refugees are coming in those countries. What human traffickers, and by the way these are not the same as smugglers, do is take young women and children and offer them, they say, a safe route to this country or that country, perhaps even to the United Kingdom, but what they actually do is put them into modern-day slavery, prostitution or forced labour. This is happening at the moment in the countries surrounding Ukraine, as the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), brought up in the debate yesterday.

My particular concern is about Moldova, which is a small country bordering Ukraine, but not in the EU. That very small country has taken in 100,000 refugees, but Moldova was already known for human trafficking. It is an area rife with those telling people that they can get them jobs and prosperity elsewhere, because it is a

poor country. There was always a problem with human trafficking gangs there, and they are now operating to a greater degree. It is not an area where we would naturally have a lot of Home Office or Foreign Office support, because it is not in the EU and it is not a country we would deal with at high level.

I would like the Minister to consider putting extra resources into those countries to fight the human traffickers. We have led the fight against human trafficking in Europe, and we need to have people on the ground at the border to stop the trafficking gangs getting hold of these people and forcing them into a most evil situation.

Tom Pursglove: It is fair to say that my hon. Friend has been a tireless advocate on these issues for many years, and he speaks with great authority about them. I hope I can provide him with some reassurance in saying that I absolutely take away the point he raises. It is fair to say that our law enforcement agencies are looking at this very closely and identifying what more we can do to work in this area. I should add that there is a very strong link through Europol, which is ensuring that we are working with our neighbours to clamp down on this in a co-ordinated way.

Mr Bone: I am very grateful for the Minister's intervention, and we have of course worked tirelessly with Europol, but I do think that the sophistication of these evil gangs cannot be overestimated and urgent action is required in that area, particularly in Moldova, but also in other countries such as Poland.

Alexander Stafford: My hon. Friend is making an incredibly point about human trafficking. Does he agree that the UK should spend some of the money in our foreign development budget on tackling human trafficking, because it is a huge issue that we know is going to get worse with this crisis? We must protect those women and girls—the children especially—as it is a ginormous issue coming down the line.

Mr Bone: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. The problem is, or has been, that when we use that sort of aid, it does not count towards this mythical zero point whatever it is per cent., but we should still do it because it is the right thing to do. We and the whole House are after protecting women and children, and we do not want to lose these people at the very point when they have fled from a most awful situation. I do hope that that is one thing the Government could look at.

I want to say something briefly about Homes for Ukraine. A number of my constituents have been very keen to help in Wellingborough—for instance, I know that the Methodist church has a number of people who want to take refugees from Ukraine—which is absolutely great, and I really appreciate what my constituents are offering. It is important, and I am glad to hear what the Minister has said, that we have wraparound support for everyone who comes here. We cannot just bring someone over, pop them in a house, and that is it, and the local authorities need to be on board. North Northamptonshire Council has been very keen on this, and Councillor Helen Harrison has played the leading role when dealing with Afghans who have come here, so I am really pleased that councils are going to be offered £10,500 per person.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): This is one of my concerns in that just getting accommodation by signing up to the website is not going to solve this, both because people will need all sorts of support to integrate and because they will be traumatised. Would it not be better for local councils to create lists of people with accommodation? The idea that this can be handled from here across the UK is not going to work; it should be as localised as possible.

Mr Bone: The hon. Lady raises a very interesting point. I have a lot of time for what she has to say, which has merit. One problem with getting Afghan refugees settled was the extra time that it took to go from the Home Office down to the local authority. North Northamptonshire Council has the ability to deal with this, and to do so quickly—and I am not a fan of centralised systems that are based on a computer that is liable to break down—so that is certainly worth looking at.

On the wraparound support that local authorities will provide, I think the Minister said there might be some extra help with education. In winding up, will he expand on that?

In summary, what my constituents have said about getting refugees over here is that, first, we should be looking after them as they come across the border. We are doing that with money. They also think that the Government have now got it right with the schemes—a little slow, I think they would say, but they are getting there. It is right that there are checks and that we do not just let any people in. On the human trafficking front, the easier we make it for traffickers to bring people in, the more people will come in and be forced into prostitution or forced labour. The Government are getting it right, and I congratulate them on what they are doing. I just wonder whether they could look at one or two points on how education will be dealt with, and whether we can speed up the process and get vulnerable women and children to local authorities quickly, rather than having to go through a more bureaucratic system.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): As the House knows, we have an important statement at 3.30 pm. It would be expedient and good management if we finished this debate at 3.29 pm. There is not too much pressure. If everybody makes a speech of between seven and eight minutes, which is quite a long time, we will achieve that, and it would be courteous to the House if that were to happen.

2.2 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). I do not know why he is surprised about the reasonableness of the Scottish National party Members—I believe we are the epitome of reasonableness. One could not pay a higher tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), who stands on the shoulders of those who are reasonable in the House. Perhaps the hon. Member for Wellingborough should have listened to my speech before coming to that conclusion, but we shall leave him to determine that.

I think the one thing that unites the whole of the UK just now is that we all stand by Ukraine. We all want to do everything possible to assist the efforts to find safe places for the millions of refugees who are now fleeing Russian aggression. We stand in awe of their passionate defence of their country in the face of what must be terrifying situations and we want to do everything possible to ensure that those who attempt to flee will be met with all the hospitality this nation can summon.

Like every Member, my mailbox has been flooded with constituents willing to offer accommodation as part of the scheme set up by the Government; and if not accommodation, they want to help with resources, materials and cash donations. As every Member also finds, my whole constituency seems to be engaged in making collections for Ukraine. I pay particular tribute to the Polish community in my constituency—the largest Polish community in Scotland, owing to the world war two fighter pilots it hosted and who settled in the city of Perth. The effort has been simply magnificent: 10,000 people per hour signing up to the accommodation scheme, with 89,000 people signing up on the first day, leading the portal to crash. If Putin counted on the people of these islands being indifferent to a conflict at the other end of Europe, he will have been very quickly disabused of that notion. I am sure he will have observed the sheer compassion our constituents have demonstrated for the victims of his aggression.

What our constituents want—it is quite a simple request, really—is for the Government to match their passion to do something about the current situation. They want the Government to be fully engaged and to act to match the energy we are seeing across the whole of the UK. Our constituents have helped to ensure that there has at least been some sort of movement by the Government, by applying pressure and writing to their Members of Parliament. I hope that effort continues over the next critical weeks. They should not have to shame the Government into action. We should expect the Government to lead that effort without any cajoling from our constituents.

Perhaps I am being a little unfair. I actually want to congratulate the Government on their efforts so far. We are impressed by some of the measures we have seen brought forward, which seem to be making a practical difference. The Minister rolled off the impact that the measures are having on the Russian economy and the oligarchs. They are being felt across the whole of Russia. They are not enough, however. The Minister—I think I heard him correctly, but he can correct me if I have got it wrong—said that there are currently 5,500 refugees in the UK. I think that was the figure he gave, but the number of refugees is about to reach the 3 million mark, so 5,500 seems to me—I do not know about you, Madam Deputy Speaker—a very small figure to be proud of, particularly when 1.8 million have gone to Poland, 263,000 to Hungary, 230,000 to Slovakia, 453,000 to Romania, and 337,000 to Moldova, doubling its population. Fair enough, those nations border Ukraine, but Germany has taken in 147,000 and Ireland, which has a tenth of the population of the UK, has taken in some 6,646. The Minister tells us there are no problems or issues with Home Office procedures and there is no difficulty with bureaucracy, but why are we still at 5,500 people? I look to him to tell us that there will be a rush or a surge of people who are going to get here. We are waiting to see that surge happen, and we have to see

it in the next day or two to be convinced that the Government are doing everything possible to act as if this is some sort of emergency.

We hear all the stuff about security concerns and the latest security advice. I am sure that to the Minister it sounds very convincing and I am pretty sure that is the sort of advice he is getting, but the questions that have been put to him are legitimate. Surely all our European allies and friends are getting the same advice, so are the Government unique in acting responsibly while the rest of the European nations are acting irresponsibly on the advice they are receiving from their security services? How on earth are they able to do more and get the numbers in that, for instance, Germany has, while the UK can get only 5,500? The suspicion remains—I hope it will be quelled—that the smokescreen of security advice is just another UK effort to slow, to deter, to frustrate and to do everything possible to make sure that people do not attempt to come to the UK. The Minister has to convince us in his summing up that that is not the case and that the Government will be doing everything they can.

I know this is difficult for the Conservatives. I get it. I know what it is like for some Conservatives. I have been observing them for the past 20 years and I shadowed home affairs for five years. I know their profound ideological beliefs when it comes to issues around immigration and people coming to the UK. I acknowledge the fact that they are deeply conflicted just now. I almost feel sorry for them, because they are obviously seeing all the images that we are seeing and I believe that they really want to do something for the refugees they observe in such difficulty. They want to make sure they are doing everything possible, but that conflicts with their inherent obsession of seeing the UK's doors remain all but closed. I know they want to offer refuge to people in crisis, but that is weighed down by practically everything that informs them about immigration, refugees and anybody seeking to come to our shores. For years, they have fomented a deep, deep antipathy to everything to do with immigration and entry to the UK. Wanting to do the right thing, they cannot help being pulled back and constrained by their very essence and political nature.

We can almost see that tension play out before our eyes in real time. There is the usual do-nothing, indifferent initial approach. Then there are inflammatory comments from the Minister about letting people pick fruit. That is the bad side, but then there is talk of 100,000 or 200,000 refugee places being available. Then there are another couple of weeks of the Government doing nothing, to see whether they have got away with it. Then there are U-turns and offers of accommodation schemes, but they are always counterbalanced by failing to meet Europe in offering visa-free access. It is a wee bit like watching the very point at which Dr Jekyll is fighting Mr Hyde for control of the body.

Part of me thinks that we should be grateful that the Government are even doing any schemes whatever, given their inherent disposition. Let us remember that this is a Government whose major political programme of the past few years has been delivering a Brexit that had immigration, taking control and stopping people coming to the UK as its cold, beating heart. This is a Government who designed the hostile environment with

the most careful attention to detail—a Government who sent hate vans to the streets of London that showed handcuffs and told illegal immigrants:

“Go home or face arrest”.

Dr Whitford: My hon. Friend is giving praise for the fact there has been movement. I am sure that all of us who have repeatedly been in this Chamber for statements and urgent questions to try to get movement and get people here feel the same, but the problem is that it has been so slow that my constituent who is trying to get her mother from Mariupol missed the window of opportunity to get her here. She has had no contact with her mother for almost a week. There will be people trapped in eastern Ukraine who have no chance of getting here because they did not set off, because they did not have somewhere to go. That slowness will have had a direct impact on people's outcomes and on people who die in eastern Ukraine.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that case. We have heard all week about such cases, in which the inaction and initial slowness to respond have led to real and profound difficulties for our constituents. She is absolutely right to highlight that case.

Given their background, maybe it is too much to expect a Government who can dream up all the horrors from hate vans to hostile environments to be a friend to refugees all of a sudden. I know that they want to do the right thing, but everything they know—everything that informs the deep-seated ideology that runs through the whole party of government—is getting in the way.

It will be up to the British people to resolve the tension and the balance, and to fortify the Dr Jekyll part of the Government's split personality. It is as if every time the Government reach for the apple of righteousness, they feel the creaking branch below, breaking their fall as they descend back into their pit of bedevilment around immigration. The people of these islands will have to keep the Government focused on doing the right thing and not let them give in to the temptations of their dark side.

Let me give the Minister an example of where he can start. The failure to get the Dnipro orphans out of Poland and home is now simply a disgrace, and it must be fixed right now. The orphans are still in Poland waiting for the UK to resolve its almost idiotic bureaucracy and get them to Scotland, where accommodation and support await them.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster) *rose*—

Pete Wishart: I see the Minister getting to his feet. I hope he will tell me that it is now resolved and that they will be on that flight on Friday. He is smiling, so I am waiting in anticipation—I am actually quite excited. I am sure he is not going to let us down.

Kevin Foster: I am grateful for the opportunity to intervene briefly from the Dispatch Box. We were approached earlier this week. For a child who is Ukrainian to be removed from Poland unaccompanied requires the consent of the Polish and Ukrainian authorities. That has not been given. However, we have indicated that if it were, we would facilitate their travel.

Pete Wishart: I am happy to accept that challenge; I heard the Deputy Prime Minister raise it at Prime Minister's questions, too. All the necessary safeguarding has been done and put in place.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): No, it hasn't. It clearly hasn't.

Pete Wishart: It has been done and put in place. Here is my challenge to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster): if everything comes through to him this afternoon—I believe it has already been sent—will he be satisfied? Will he allow those children to get on that plane to the accommodation waiting for them, the support in place, and those ready to look after them?

Kevin Foster: As I pointed out, these Ukrainian children are in Poland. For them to be moved unaccompanied requires the consent of the Ukrainian Government and the Polish authorities. If that is given, we would look to facilitate it; it has not.

Pete Wishart: Right. We will make sure that, once again, the information is given to the Minister. I hear him say that there is going to be movement—

Eddie Hughes: Once again? He has not been given it.

Pete Wishart: We will make sure that it is given. I think that the Minister is reasonably genuine about wanting to resolve it and get it fixed. Let us remember that these are children who have left without passports and have no information to support them. If that is what is required, that is what will be given, and we will make sure that they get on the plane.

I pay tribute to the Dnipro Kids appeal. A bunch of Hibs fans went to Dnipro 17 years ago for a UEFA cup tie against the team there—I cannot remember its name, but I am sure it has one of these fancy names like the Dynamos or whatever—and have kept the association and relationship for all that time. They have worked selflessly to make sure that orphans in Ukraine, even at times of peace, are looked after. Here they are, sitting in Poland, wanting to get these kids home. *[Interruption.]* I hear the Minister. Let us now work together, and we will get that fixed. A plane is going from Heathrow to Poland on Thursday with medical supplies, resources and facilities. That plane should be taking these children right back to Heathrow, where there is a train waiting for them to get to Scotland, where they will meet up with all their colleagues at the Hibernian football club on Easter Road and the children will be placed in accommodation across Scotland.

Kevin Foster *rose*—

Pete Wishart: I am sure that the Minister will tell me the same thing, but we are working together and we will ensure that we get the information through. I see him holding a letter; if he wants to intervene again, I give way.

Kevin Foster: I will very briefly state that the letter from the Ukrainian ambassador to the UK Government makes it clear that no Ukrainian child can be placed in the care of foreigners without the consent of Ukraine. I am interested to hear the hon. Gentleman's points, and

I note the comments that were made in this House earlier, but the point is that the Ukrainian Government need to consent to their children—their citizens—being moved from Poland. That consent has not been given. This is not a Home Office issue.

Pete Wishart: That consent will be communicated to the Minister.

I do not know why I have been blessed by this organisation within my constituency—Steve Carr, who has organised Dnipro Kids, is a Perth resident—but my constituent Gavin Price, who just so happens to be the boss of Elgin City football club and who owns the Schiehallion hotel and the Fountain bar in Aberfeldy, has a database of 20 businesses in highland Perthshire that could offer sponsorship and places of employment to about 100 refugees. Some 40 homes in that wonderful part of Scotland, highland Perthshire—not a place high in density of population—are prepared to play their part and accommodate those refugees if they can be offered those positions and can get across to Scotland.

Gavin has applied to the usual schemes and has not heard a thing. I raised his case in the House two weeks ago and have not even been given the courtesy of a reply to tell me exactly what is going to happen. The initiative would not only find accommodation places for refugees, but help tourism businesses in a fragile rural area that can no longer get their staff because of Brexit—they just cannot get people to work in those places. They are finding employment opportunities for refugees, who could work under the scheme for three years. These are people that those businesses need and require, which would help them out during the crisis created thanks to this Government and their crazy Brexit policy. Maybe the resistance to the idea is something to do with that—I really hope not.

These are community organisations in constituencies getting together and solving a problem on behalf of this Government. They are not asking the Government to do any work or do anything in particular; all they are asking is that the Government say, “Yes, you can come in.” We understand that even the flights are going to be paid for, so that is not even an issue for the Government. Communities around the country are organising, like Gavin and others in Aberfeldy and highland Perthshire—please let them.

I want the Government to get over their Brexit demons—their anti-immigration, “stop people coming through” demons. I want them to do the right thing and match the efforts of our constituents. The parable of Jekyll and Hyde is that they were both finished off by not being able to keep their split personality in balance. It is up to the Government to get us back into balance and do the right thing by these refugees.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We are not doing very well on the seven to eight minutes, so let us try a little bit harder—for around seven minutes. I call Huw Merriman.

2.19 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): You say “seven minutes”, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart)

has just spoken for 17 minutes. Members have talked of graciousness and reasonableness; perhaps they should also consider the time afforded to everyone else.

What is most important is that we provide a warm welcome, as a country that really wants to help and to stand up for refugees. Our country has a proud record in that regard. Here are two separate schemes that are uncapped, and will allow people to come here for three years and gain access to benefits, education, welfare support and training. This must surely be fair; given that there has been some criticism on the basis that we do not offer the same terms to other refugees, it cannot be that bad.

Let me say to all Members that they should not stand up and denigrate this system, trying to suggest that these desperate people are not welcome here, and then ask why so few are coming. If I were one of those people and had listened to the speech from the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire, I would not want to come here either. The simple fact is that we are a generous country, this is a scheme that will work, and we should be judged by our results.

Pete Wishart: Five thousand five hundred!

Huw Merriman: The hon. Gentleman yells a number at me. Let me give some more numbers. Between 2015 and 2020, the UK resettled 24,700 refugees—and resettling refugees is what this is all about. The next best country in Europe was Sweden, which resettled 20,900. We should be judged on what we actually do rather than the rhetoric from others about what they think we will do, because it is markedly different.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Huw Merriman: I will not, because I am respectful to the Chair. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman could learn from that.

What it is right for us to do is condemn the actions of President Putin, who has caused what will be the largest refugee crisis in Europe. We must do everything we can to ensure that he is brought down, so that those Ukrainians can go back to the country that they love, which is their own country.

Let me now, again in a spirit of positivity, hail and thank the Home Office officials who signed off a visa to allow a constituent of mine to bring her pregnant sister and her disabled mother to this country. I visited the pop-up casework centre in Parliament, which has done fantastic work, and I went through the whole case. The visas had indeed been processed. Those people are working really hard, but they cannot be expected to work better if they are constantly denigrated and knocked. That does their morale no good at all. Perhaps a thank you to them would not go amiss. It is possible to scrutinise policy without using insults.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Huw Merriman: I will not give way, for the reason that I have already mentioned. I want to stick to the time that you specified, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It is right that we scrutinise the programme, and I want to ask a few questions about how it will ultimately work. I firmly believe that the process must work for the numbers to be maximised—and we want to take as many people as we can.

First, I want to ask about the system of sponsorship. I note that we are focusing more on individuals than on organisations. Will there have to be an existing contact in the system, or will a contact made over the last week be sufficient to identify the necessary link? May I also ask about safeguarding? Who will check sponsor suitability? We must ensure that the homes are safe and welcoming, and also that they meet the accommodation needs of the people who are coming here. As we have heard, they will have great needs and there will be great challenges.

I agree with what was said by, I think, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). Surely it is better for a list to be made locally, because local authorities are better placed to do this, than for us to ask people to go into a system and be matched—an arrangement that strikes me as less structured and organised, and therefore perhaps less safe, than a localised system. I was somewhat surprised that individuals rather than organisations were to be first in this movement, but obviously I will be convinced if a better reason for that can be given.

What will be the role of local authorities in assessing the suitability of sponsors? When will they receive guidance about that role? Will they be fully funded? The allocation of £10,500 per person sounds generous, but we could be talking about three years of people in great need—great “wraparound” need—and local authorities will be expected to fund that. I know that education will be an addition, but I fear that if local authorities are not fully funded, they will face challenges that will have an impact on local community support.

Finally, may I ask when the Ukrainian refugees will be allowed to arrive? That is relevant to my previous point, because if local authorities are not ready because they do not have the guidance, there may well be a delay in the arrival of the refugees, which of course we do not want.

I have made those points in six minutes, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think it important that we scrutinise the policy, and I hope I have done so with some of my questions about how it will work in practice. But in this context, rhetoric is important. We must ensure that we make this work, and show that we support it and are positive about it, because that will give confidence to all the desperate people whom we want to come over here in large numbers so we can help them. I fear that if we send the wrong message from this place they will not come, and that would be a disaster.

Ukrainian refugees are welcome in Bexhill and Battle. We will do everything we can to host them, to support them, to make them feel that this is their home, and to show them the solidarity and love that they need and deserve.

2.26 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I truly wish that it were a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). May I ask him to look at *Hansard*? I have already congratulated the staff in the Home Office hub, and in fact I took them on a tour last night because I thought they needed a break.

[Marion Fellows]

I think we all stand with Ukraine, and the one thing that we all want is for more Ukrainian people who are fleeing from the terrible atrocities and war in their country to be able to come here. The Home Office system is designed to keep people out; it cannot suddenly swing round and let lots of people in. It could if it chose to waive visas, but I do not think that that is going to happen.

I am sure that the Immigration Minister will welcome yet another update from me on the case that we have been working on together. My constituent is still in Warsaw, waiting for his visa to be printed and waiting to be told to go and collect it. His sister-in-law has now arrived there from Lviv. Because she applied later than him—he began his application on 12 February—he thinks that she will probably arrive here before him; or rather not before him, because he is a UK national, but before his wife and her daughters.

I am now going to speak for a few moments in my capacity as the Westminster Scottish National party spokesperson on disabilities. I have written to the Foreign Secretary asking for her help. The European Disability Forum has estimated that 2.7 million disabled people currently live in Ukraine, and they are disproportionately impacted by war and emergencies. They find it hard to gain access to medication, accessible transport and infrastructure, care, equipment and mobility aids, which creates barriers for them.

The regional governor in Kyiv, Oleksiy Kuleba, has raised concerns about the evacuation of people from hospitals, particularly those who have additional needs or require essential access to medication. I know that the admission of children with cancer to this country has been expedited, but there are many more folk who need help. As I have said before, in Westminster Hall, it is vital for the UK to take cognisance of article 11 of the United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. The hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) talked about aid for foreign countries; we need to target aid more specifically at those with disabilities, and I hope that the Minister will say something about that today.

More generally, the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales wrote a joint letter to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to agree that their countries will take part in the UK-wide scheme and to ask that folk be moved further and faster. They want to be super-sponsors, but I do not believe they have yet had an answer to their letter. I urge Ministers to provide a response.

I am conscious of time, so I will not speak for too much longer. The Refugee Council has said that the UK is not as welcoming to Ukrainian refugees as the EU countries are—the UK has to waive the visa requirement. The British Red Cross agrees that the quickest way of fixing the problems in the system would be to remove the requirement for a visa, which has been done elsewhere. According to the Disasters Emergency Committee, the most recent arrivals to countries surrounding Ukraine have few family ties, have nowhere to go and are deeply traumatised.

The number of lone children crossing the border is rising. I do not think anyone in this House disagrees with the need to safeguard children but, as a simple

woman from Wishaw, I would say the best way to safeguard children is to get them here, and to get them here as quickly as possible.

I know that the Scottish Minister with responsibility for refugees, Neil Gray MSP, has been talking to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster). The people who stayed in Ukraine, in the hope of remaining in their own area, are now left with no alternative but to flee with very little.

I spoke at length in Westminster Hall about the bureaucracy and difficulty of applying for a visa. How can anyone fleeing for their life be expected to apply online for entry into the UK? I strongly appeal to both Ministers to get something done that actually improves the UK's figures. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle said that Sweden has taken fewer folk than the UK, but Sweden is a country of 10 million people and, at the last count, the UK has more than 60 million people. [Interruption.] I am sorry if I have that wrong, but I will not get into a battle on this. I am just asking the Ministers, please review your systems. I know Home Office staff are working hard, and I appreciate how hard they are working, but they are working against a system that is designed to keep people out. Do something about that. Waiving visas is easiest, so think about it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I know the hon. Lady did not mean to address the Ministers directly, so we will just pretend that she did it correctly.

An unusual thing has happened: two Members who had indicated that they wanted to speak are not here and are not going to speak. We can therefore go back to around eight to nine minutes. I am sorry to the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), both of whom were very brief, but such brevity is now not absolutely required.

2.33 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is tempting to construct my whole speech around correcting inaccuracies in the speech of the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) but, because I do not have the time, I will not do so. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) will put him right on the per capita, or per head, share of refugees taken by countries across Europe. Per capita is what matters.

Huw Merriman: Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Joanna Cherry: The hon. Gentleman has had his turn. Looking at the per capita share across Europe, the United Kingdom falls in the middle of the table rather than at the top, as he would like to suggest.

Huw Merriman: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The record will be checked, but I related the figures on resettled refugees and listed the numbers. It is on BBC Reality Check, and nothing is incorrect. If there is, BBC Reality Check is incorrect.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): There is clearly a disagreement here, which is why we are having a debate. Debates are about disagreement. This has been a polite debate so far, so let us keep it that way.

This is obviously not a point of order for the Chair, but the hon. Gentleman has put his point of view on the record. The hon. and learned Lady has done so, too, and I have a feeling she will do so again. If there is a disagreement, I hope she might take an intervention because it is not a matter for the Chair.

Joanna Cherry: If the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle had taken interventions during his speech, we could have clarified it then. The key words are “per capita,” which mean “per head.” As I said, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East will set out those figures in her speech.

The single biggest thing the UK Government could do to ensure the efficient evacuation and resettlement of Ukrainian refugees would be to permit visa-free access to the United Kingdom, in the same way that our near neighbours such as Ireland and, indeed, all the member states of the European Union are doing. It seems to me that there are two reasons for the refusal to do this, and neither is tenable. The first is alleged concerns about security, and the second is dogma, by which I mean this Government are thrownly clinging to their anti-refugee and anti-asylum seeker policies despite all the evidence that they are untenable because of the new order in Europe ushered in by Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine.

We debated these matters in Westminster Hall on Monday afternoon, and I put it to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), that the Government’s security concerns are unfounded according to such a distinguished expert as Lord Peter Ricketts. Sadly, the Minister failed to address my point and instead resorted to a cheap and unfounded attack on the record of City of Edinburgh Council, and indeed my constituents, in rehousing people fleeing other war zones, particularly Syria and Afghanistan.

Fortunately, today’s debate will give the Minister the opportunity to set the record straight and, if he is able, to explain why his Government are pleading security risks against free access, despite expert evidence that such risks as might exist are small and can be managed safely without visas.

I pray in aid Lord Peter Ricketts, who is of course a former National Security Adviser. He spoke about these matters in the other place last week, and he was interviewed by Mark D’Arcy for “Today in Parliament.” He said:

“Security is always a matter of risk management—there is never zero risk.”

However, as these refugees are mainly women and children, they do not, in his opinion, pose a security risk. The UK Government therefore should not require visas, and they should do the security checks once the women and children are here. We have heard other speakers, and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), explain how that could be done.

Lord Peter Ricketts thinks we can do it, the European Union can do it and Ireland can do it, why cannot the United Kingdom? The Minister did not answer that question in Westminster Hall on Monday. He tried to deflect attention from his failure to answer that crucial question by attacking the record of local authorities in Scotland, including City of Edinburgh Council, which covers my constituency of Edinburgh South West. As so often with him, his attacks were unfounded in fact.

Let me take this opportunity to put the Minister right. The people of Scotland and our capital city of Edinburgh stand ready to welcome refugees from Ukraine, as we have always done. We have already heard about the generous offer from the Scottish Government. Since 2015, City of Edinburgh Council has resettled 585 Syrian refugees, the majority by the council but two households by Refugee Sponsorship Edinburgh, including a number of my constituents with whom I worked to get that sponsorship scheme off the ground. Those refugees have been supported by local partners such as the Welcoming Association in my constituency.

Since the fiasco of the UK’s withdrawal from Afghanistan last August, City of Edinburgh Council has accepted more than 200 Afghan refugees. City of Edinburgh Council has produced a plan to increase the number of refugees it takes each year. In fact, looking again at per capita, which means per head—

Tom Pursglove: Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Joanna Cherry: Not at this moment.

On the resettlement of refugees, Scotland has taken more per head of population for 14 of the last 16 quarters since 2017. On average, Scotland has taken 5.4% above its population share, which is more than Wales and Northern Ireland have. Meanwhile, England has taken 12.8% below its population share, for which the Home Office has full responsibility. On section 95 asylum support, we know that Glasgow City Council has located in Scotland a percentage higher than Scotland’s per population share and higher than that of any council in the UK. As the Minister was reminded in Monday’s debate, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has said that it would be willing to take more asylum seekers if the British Government give it the support it needs to do so. Rather than trying to score petty and ill-informed points against the people of Edinburgh, my constituents, their council and the people of Scotland, the Minister should be getting the Home Secretary to ensure that asylum support is properly funded.

We could do with a little more humility from the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Torbay after his Twitter gaff on fruit picking, but unfortunately his attitude continues to exemplify a callous and hubristic approach in his Department. Just yesterday, in *The Times*, the chief executive of the Red Cross argued that the Government must make the

“Nationality and Borders Bill more humane”

They could do that when it comes back to this House next week; they would have a chance to change course. The other place has removed some of the most egregious parts of the Bill, including the criminalisation of asylum seekers and plans for offshore processing. The Lords have also lifted the ban on asylum seekers working, which is a huge victory for campaigners from the Scottish charity the Maryhill Integration Network, which my colleagues and I have been proud to support. At the very least, the Government should preserve those changes to the Bill when it comes back to the House on Tuesday, because it would surely be horrifying if, in the midst of the current crisis, this House was to pass legislation that would criminalise Ukrainians who arrive at our borders seeking asylum outside the limited schemes announced so far. Let us hear from the Minister that there will be a

[Joanna Cherry]

change of tack on that Bill. Let us hear from him why Lord Peter Ricketts, the former national security adviser, is wrong about security and why the British Government, alone of our neighbours in Europe, cannot manage security without visas. Let us also hear a fact-based acknowledgement of the contribution made by my constituents, the City of Edinburgh Council, local authorities in Scotland and the Scottish Government to welcoming refugees, which, as I have explained, based on the data, is the most generous in the UK.

2.42 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): It was interesting to hear the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) talking about a warm welcome. Of course, a warm welcome entails more than just our mouthing the words; by its very nature, it needs actions, in relation to shelter and safety, in order for people to feel welcomed. Plaid Cymru has long called for a compassionate and generous response to everyone—every human being fleeing persecution and wars. We firmly reject the notion that our support is given only to a certain few. Believing in our common humanity, we believe that everybody deserves shelter, safety and the opportunity for a flourishing life.

The public outpouring of support for the Homes for Ukraine schemes is unprecedented, yet it is also frustrating to see that the support offered so far for refugees from Ukraine falls short of that ambition. As many have said thoroughly, this is especially pronounced when we make the comparison with how other countries have responded. I do not want to go into all the detail, and many other countries have been listed already, but I just wish to refer to Ireland. That nation has a population of 5 million. Obviously, it is a country that we in Wales compare ourselves with; its capital city is my nearest one. Crucially, it is a sea-girt nation in almost every respect. How many people are received is not a matter of geography—Ireland, with its population of 5 million, has received more than 6,600 refugees—but a matter of attitude. It is unfortunate to see attitude at work here. None the less, I welcome the fact that the Government are now listening and finally providing some pathways for refugees from Ukraine to enter the UK.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The right hon. Lady has made an important point about the action that has been taken by Ireland, which has not only taken the numbers it has with the population it has—the UK Government should reflect on that—but supplied every one of those Ukrainian refugees with a personal identification number to access services. That means that when they land in Ireland, they have support. People are fleeing their houses, and they have left their possessions and sometimes they have left their loved ones behind. They are tired and hungry, and they need support. What a difference in attitude we see here; what a missed opportunity for a Government who want to portray themselves as a world power to gain soft power, as Ireland has done. Is this not a lesson for this Government? Should they not look at what is happening elsewhere and institute some of that compassion themselves?

Liz Saville Roberts: I agree entirely on that. In the spirit of wishing to see this work and to support our constituents in their heartfelt desire to help people, primarily those fleeing Ukraine, I say that we need the detail. Our local authorities are crying out for the detail. It is the detail and the actions that we need to see. We compare ourselves with Ireland, and we would like to see this Government follow suit. It is approaching a month since the invasion of Ukraine—it did not happen last week—and we have been asking for this over and over again.

Wales has shown in the recent past that we can offer a welcome embrace to refugees, as was the case with families fleeing Afghanistan. I wish to highlight a particular example, that of Urdd Gobaith Cymru, which is Wales's largest youth organisation. It provided sanctuary and support for more than 100 Afghan refugees—I believe the exact figure was 103—throughout their first five months in Cardiff. That welcome included an offer of food and bridging accommodation; access to social spaces; a schedule of daily sports and activities; a programme of varied workshops; careers advice; nursery recreational sessions; and visits to national sporting events. This is recognised as being a leading example of how to help refugees integrate into Welsh communities and one of the best practices of resettlement in the UK. It was possible only with the full engagement of councils, the Welsh Government, the Urdd and other charities. In a response to a question from my friend Delyth Jewell, Aelod Senedd, yesterday, the First Minister Mark Drakeford confirmed that the Welsh Government will be considering a similar scheme for Ukrainian refugees. It is vital that the UK Government recognise the lessons of that success for refugees from Ukraine.

Plaid Cymru councils also have a particularly good track record on resettlement, including of families from Syria and from Afghanistan. Plaid Cymru-led local authorities in general have an above average resettlement rate compared to that for the UK as a whole, with Ceredigion having the highest resettlement rate in Wales, at 10 people per 10,000 of population, and Carmarthenshire having resettled the highest number of people in Wales, at 172. That is exceptional, especially given the rural nature of those local authorities.

How are we looking for Ukrainian national support networks to operate beyond the south-east and beyond London? If we are resettling people throughout the UK, it is essential that they have that national support and that it is extended beyond the south-east.

Plaid Cymru councils will, of course, play their part in the new sponsorship pathway. My council, Cyngor Gwynedd, wrote to the Prime Minister yesterday to express its willingness and that of the people in Gwynedd to provide sanctuary for refugees as soon as possible and urged for the sponsorship pathway to replicate the arrangements that exist in Ireland. As we have heard, refugees in Ireland are welcomed on arrival to comfortable processing centres where they have access to basic essentials and children have access to a safe play area.

I seek a further response about something I mentioned in an earlier question, which is onward travel. Will people be able to afford to get to where they need to get to? We have a number of suitable places in Wales to act as welcome centres, including the Urdd sites, community centres, church and chapel properties, and university and college accommodation. Those sites would ensure

that people are given an opportunity to rest and to be paired with appropriate support, and to ensure they are not left isolated once arriving in Wales. Do the UK Government intend to work with us in Wales to implement that approach? We were talking earlier about the super-sponsor scheme in Scotland, and I would really like to hear from the Government and the Minister how they can work to make sure that this operates effectively. In this case, what extra resources are going to be made available not just for local authorities—we know about the £10,500—but for non-governmental organisations and charities, and for the super-sponsorship scheme? What actual money will be available to make this as effective as possible?

Sadly, the sponsorship scheme leaves a list of unanswered questions. My own council, Gwynedd, asked me to ask when it will have a regional contact from the Home Office, as it previously had under the Afghan and Syria schemes. It needs that to be able to move ahead. What role will it have? What will be the funding and safeguarding arrangements? How will the scheme work with housing, welfare and other support services?

Despite these many gaps, very many people in Wales have already registered for the sponsorship scheme because they want to help; it has touched their hearts. While it is fantastic to see such public good will and generosity of spirit, we cannot ignore the fact that visa sponsorship will inevitably lock out the most vulnerable refugees who fall through the cracks. To ensure that we are helping as many people as possible, we should be cutting the bureaucracy and delay by waiving visa requirements, as EU countries did weeks ago. If the UK Government still insist on maintaining visa restrictions, then they should at least allow Wales to be given super-sponsor status so that we will be able to take in large numbers directly and manage them ourselves. Again, I ask for an update on how this will operate. In general, the delayed and inconsistent UK response to Ukrainian refugees is not in keeping with Wales's stated ambition to be a nation of sanctuary.

With the number of displaced people set to increase due to climate change, we need a modern, compassionate system that is fit for purpose not just for this present awful emergency but for the future. The creation of bespoke schemes is the wrong approach, as it creates arbitrary distinctions between those people who are deserving of our help and those people who are, in effect, undeserving of it. That is exactly why we have the refugee convention, which does away with such distinctions. This Government are hellbent on ripping up that convention through the Nationality and Borders Bill, which the UN has described as not respecting obligations under international human rights and refugee law. The convention acknowledges the reality that people who have fled dangerous situations cannot be expected to wait for help. We must reimagine our whole approach, create a new, compassionate refugee and asylum system, and support all those who need our help—people from Ukraine and from the rest of the world, be that Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, or wherever they may be in future.

2.52 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Allow me, at the outset of my remarks, to salute the courage of the people of Ukraine, who are being brutalised by a kleptocratic murderer who seeks to deny them the rights

that all free people wish for—the rights simply to be able to live in peace with their neighbours in prosperity and to be able to choose the manner in which they are governed and who they are governed by. We should be clear that the only person responsible for the situation that we are discussing right now—the only person responsible for the tide of humanity and misery that we are seeing exit Ukraine—is Vladimir Putin himself.

But while we are not responsible, that does not mean that we are without responsibilities. I commend the UK Government for the military aid and the long-term approach taken to military training. We are seeing the effectiveness of that in defending the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. I commend the humanitarian response that there has been from all quarters. A small example from my own constituency is the work of Mark Allan, a part-time firefighter who, together with the Scottish Emergency Rescue Association, has been working with my constituency office to get the necessary paperwork from the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency in order to be able to take fire engines to Ukraine to assist with the humanitarian effort.

What concerns me is what we are doing, or more often not doing, with regard to sanctuary. The Home Office is clearly a Department that, for some time, has not had its troubles to seek, whether in terms of its organisational capacity, its institutional culture or aspects of its political leadership. I do not say that to be critical of the thousands of dedicated people within that organisation who are working night and day to achieve the best outcomes that they possibly can in the most unprecedented and distressing of circumstances, but equally that should not hinder us from saying that more needs to be done when that is true, because let us be quite clear about this: we are seeing the biggest enforced mass movement of people, unparalleled in scale, since world war two.

I have been working, as I am sure we all have, with constituents who have their own stories to tell—who are either fleeing with family members who are Ukrainian nationals or trying to bring over a sister, a brother, a cousin or somebody else who is dear and special to them. The thread that runs through this is that they have all reported the same traumatic story not just of conflict, death and injury, but of the obstacles and time delays of the visa application system that they have encountered. While I welcome the changes and flexibilities that came into place yesterday that allow Ukrainian nationals to do their biometrics in the UK, that has not changed the essential nature of the unnecessary suffering for many refugees trying to flee the most desperate and dangerous of circumstances to seek safety in the UK.

To give an example, one of my constituents, whose case became known in the press, is Kenneth Stewart, who tried to leave with his family before the attacks from the Russian state began, when the advice from the UK Government was to leave on commercial flights, but was unable to leave with his wife, who is a Ukrainian national. They have two young children, the youngest of whom was born only two weeks previously. They fled initially to Poland to seek sanctuary there, and arrived in the UK only last week, as soon as they were permitted to enter as a family. Along the way, quite apart from the dangers that they encountered as the attacks were under way, they had to wait in a 40-hour queue at the Polish border in sub-zero temperatures—and this, remember,

[Richard Thomson]

with a two-week child in the back. That is absolutely unimaginable for all of us. While I am glad that they are here and they are safe, and that their circumstances are moving on, we should understand that we are still potentially placing many others in similar situations as they seek to come to safety.

Another constituent, Lyudmyla Wilson, has faced numerous obstacles in trying to bring her daughter and grandchildren safely through the visa process. She has had difficulty accessing information through the helplines, and that has only added to the anxiety and fears for her daughter's and grandchildren's safety. She was advised to wait for the results of her biometrics, which she did on Saturday. My office is still following up on that, but unfortunately, as far as I am aware, in the time since I took to my feet, she is still waiting for a decision that we are told is in progress. I could go on.

Last week, in response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), the Prime Minister boasted:

"We have done more to resettle vulnerable people than any other European country since 2015."—[*Official Report*, 9 March 2022; Vol. 710, c. 318.]

Let us examine and unpack that claim a little bit. In the past two weeks, some 2.8 million Ukrainian refugees have already fled the horrors of war, and, as we have heard, that number is rising rapidly. Of the upwards of 260,000 who have made their way to countries that do not directly border Ukraine, only a fraction have so far been able to come to the UK. While the UK has issued about 4,000 family visas, many thousands more are currently stuck in the application process, and many, many thousands beyond that, I am certain, have not even entered the process yet.

I am sorry to say that the contrast at this point, whatever the good intentions, could not be clearer. Across Europe, our neighbours are stepping up to meet this challenge, waiving bureaucratic requirements and placing refuge and sanctuary first with bureaucracy coming second, where it ought to be. EU guidelines approved on 3 March on the temporary protection directive demonstrate how a high level of security and assurance can be maintained while removing the bureaucratic barriers for those in need. The directive offers temporary protection in the EU, giving individuals fleeing war residence permits and access to education and the labour market. In the midst of a conflict, it is neither reasonable nor morally acceptable to expect individuals to have to overcome those hurdles. We can bring them to safety now at no detriment to our own safety while allowing them then to complete the processes that we would wish them to.

It is not just the SNP that is saying this. The Refugee Council has said the UK has not been as welcoming for Ukrainian refugees as our EU counterparts, saying that the response to date "falls short" and

"will inevitably be restricted to those who are known to people in the UK".

The British Red Cross, which I would hope we could take as an unimpeachable authority on this, has said that the quickest way of fixing problems in the system would be to remove the requirements for a visa, as has been done in other countries.

I firmly believe that the UK Government must go further and faster to help refugees by supporting the Scottish and Welsh Government super sponsors bid.

In a joint letter from the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales to the UK Minister for Housing, they have agreed to take part in the UK-wide scheme, which is absolutely right, but they call for the scheme to go further and faster with less bureaucracy, and propose becoming super sponsors to speed up the process. The newly appointed Scottish refugee Minister, Neil Gray, who is well known to this House from the time that he served as the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts, has said:

"By acting as 'super sponsor' rather than waiting for the UK government's matching process, we can provide safety and sanctuary to people immediately and welcome significant numbers of refugees from Ukraine to Scotland",

including by providing support mechanisms for refugees such as temporary accommodation and wraparound support while longer-term arrangements are put in place.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am acutely aware of your strictures on time, so I will draw my remarks to a close by saying that I am sure that people across these islands are ready to open their doors and their hearts to these refugees, and it is time to waive visa requirements and put people, rather than processes, first.

3 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I want to acknowledge two things at the outset. First, the UK is not doing nothing and what the UK has done so far will have made a massive difference for some to whom we have given protection. Some may end up as MPs in this place one day, talking about how they came to the UK as refugees in 2022. There is no doubt that we will have saved and shaped lives, and have enabled some simply to have a life. This Government are not doing nothing and it would be wrong to claim otherwise, which is why nobody has claimed that today.

I also want to acknowledge that none of this is the fault of anyone other than Vladimir Putin and his regime, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) said. It is not the fault of a European Government, of the people of these islands or of the Russian people, and it certainly is not the fault of the Ukrainian people, but our lack of culpability is irrelevant to our duty, both legal and moral.

As an immigration spokesperson and someone who has a very significant immigration case load in my constituency, and as someone who sat on the Nationality and Borders Bill Committee, scrutinising every line along with my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), I am always concerned when this UK Tory Government is required to fulfil that legal and moral duty, because I do not think they think there is a legal duty, and judging by the way they continually invite pats on the head and talk of how generous they are, I do not think they believe they have a moral duty either. They would not bring forward a Bill such as the Nationality and Borders Bill—which, ironically, returns from the Lords next week—if they had any desire, or believed they had any duty, to protect people fleeing war, violence and terror. The Nationality and Borders Bill, widely known as the anti-refugee Bill, is clearly trying to send a signal that benevolent Britain is no more: "Do not come here, because you will not be welcome."

As I said, the Government are not doing nothing to help Ukrainian refugees, but they must understand that our duty, not just as Opposition MPs but as Members of this Parliament, of whatever party, is to speak up when we think the Government have got it wrong and to say where we believe the Government need to go on this issue. Otherwise we might as well just go home, take the salary and do nothing for it. I will list some of my concerns, many of which have been raised by colleagues but which I want to reinforce.

The response to refugees has been chaotic. I do not believe the Government have got it right yet, but they have had to be dragged, kicking and screaming even to get to the stage they have currently reached. Those of us who regularly have contact with the Home Office know that its *modus operandi* is to change the rules regularly and blindside people. Immigration lawyers can hardly keep up, MPs and caseworkers cannot keep up, refugees cannot keep up; that is the Home Office MO, and it is deliberate. It is adopted to deny people their rights, and the chaotic way in which the current situation was handled is that MO in microcosm. Anybody would think the Home Office did not want people to come here! From 24 February to 14 March it updated the guidance 11 separate times.

I want to say something about the children we were talking about earlier, and which my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) raised in Prime Minister's questions, and the chaotic way in which that has been dealt with. We are failing in our duty to those children, and—[*Interruption.*] If the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) will let me finish, I want to say this. His colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who is no longer in his place, said that the Ukrainian Government have to give permission. That is right—we agree with that—and there is a Ukrainian Government Minister at the child processing centre right now who can give permission, yet the Westminster leader of the SNP must arrange it, because somehow it is not the Home Office Ministers' job. Well, it is their job. [*Interruption.*] The Minister is shaking his head; so surely after this debate he will get that sorted so that those children will be brought to safety.

That aside, progress is being made, but why does it have to be so chaotic? Why do we have to make it so hard for people, and why are we still not offering anything comparable to what EU countries are offering? I know the Government do not like it when we compare what is happening here with EU countries, but we are not doing that because they are European; we are doing it because they have comparable economies and population size and we do not compare favourably, no matter what others think. I will come on to that shortly.

Nevertheless, we are slowly getting there, and one method is the Homes for Ukraine scheme. That cannot replace our legal duty, but I am delighted that so many people—120,000—have registered so far, opening their hearts and their homes to others. However, safeguarding remains a concern, and I know that it is a shared concern. Most of those using that scheme will be traumatised women and children and those men who are too vulnerable to be able to stay and fight, and we must ensure that they have the knowledge and means to

reach out if it goes wrong; we must ensure they have the confidence to tell somebody if the placement is not working. They need to know who they can go to, and they also need to know they can approach them for any reason. They might just not feel comfortable, for instance. Perhaps a woman on her own with children is staying with a male who makes them feel a little uncomfortable and they might not be able to put their finger on why—perhaps it is just an inability to communicate with their hosts. I am sure most of those offering to share their homes do so from a place of compassion and would agree that we need to be careful in our vetting and follow-on, so that we do not end up inadvertently helping to traffic people into the sex trade who are then terrorised by their captors into not reporting it. That is what often happens now, and we must be very clear that they will be protected if they report such things. I know the Government have said that they will take that on board.

Mr Bone: The hon. Lady is making a crucial point about the way traffickers will bring people into this country, but they also coach people in this country, and they will threaten people so they do not report that. That is why vetting, checking and wraparound support from local councils is so important. The hon. Lady has touched on an extremely important point that we all must be aware of.

Anne McLaughlin: The hon. Gentleman has done so much in this respect for victims of trafficking.

I want to repeat that Positive Action in Housing based in Glasgow has a rooms-for-refugees scheme; it is not a paid scheme, but none the less over 20 years there have been 4,000 successful placements. It has great experience in this field and the Government could usefully speak to it and other organisations about their experiences.

I raised the issue of visas and asked a number of pertinent questions on Monday, but the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Torbay chose to ignore them, so I tried to intervene, and he refused to engage at all. He continued with the pretence that what we on the Opposition Benches, and many on the Government Benches, are asking for is unusual. Yet thousands of people enter the UK every day without visas: anyone from Australia can come here without a visa; anyone from Mexico can come without a visa; and anyone from Costa Rica can come without a visa. Thousands every week, too, from Canada, from Japan, from Namibia, from South Korea, and from the US, arrive here without a visa.

The Government say that to allow Ukrainians to do so in their moment of need would somehow pose a threat to our safety. As if having a visa is in itself a safeguard: as my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East mentioned, the two Russian military intelligence officers who entered the UK and made their way to Salisbury to carry out a revenge attack on a former MI6 spy, which resulted in the death of local woman Dawn Sturgess, applied for and got their visas before they arrived. A visa is no safeguard.

In Monday's debate, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) raised the fact, as she has again today, that Lord Ricketts, who I am willing to bet has much more experience than any of us in this House—

Tom Pursglove: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anne McLaughlin: The Minister does not know what I am going to say—he should wait till I say it. Lord Ricketts has said he is not concerned that we are going to bring in security threats. On Monday, my hon. and learned Friend asked questions and I repeated her question. She tried to intervene when the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Torbay was speaking, but he refused to give way. I tried to intervene. If the Minister present can tell us why Lord Ricketts is wrong, why all the people who come from the aforementioned countries can come here without a visa and pose no threat, and why Ukrainians are so much more of a danger to us, I will perhaps reach a conclusion different from the one I have reached today.

Tom Pursglove: I think the hon. Lady will recognise the unique threat that the Russian state presents. We are currently seeing terrible atrocities in Ukraine, which shows the Russian state's barbarity and the lengths to which it is willing to go. The hon. Lady has cited various comparisons; what does she make of the counter-argument that we are taking a stance similar to that of the United States and Canada—another Five Eyes country—which take a view akin to ours?

Anne McLaughlin: We are far more comparable to European countries, and particularly to Ireland. I ask the question that I asked earlier: is the Minister saying that all the European countries, including Ireland, are simply not cognisant of any security threat, or that they do not care and are putting their people in danger? I do not think they are; I think they know what they are doing. Many of the things that the Government said in this place they could not do they have subsequently done, through some of the 11 changes to the guidance that I mentioned. For example, the Government could not allow family members who did not fit the narrow criteria, but now they can. I do not want to be in a situation, in six, four or two weeks' time, in which we say, "Okay, we'll waive the need for a visa." The Government could do that now. Just do it: put Ukraine on the list of countries whose people do not require a visa to come here—a list much lengthier than the one I read out—as other European countries have done, and people will get here. Let me tell Members what will happen. Those who are fighting—

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anne McLaughlin: No. I am not giving way to somebody who has not even been interested enough to sit through the debate—as long as the hon. Gentleman is somebody who was not interested enough. [*Interruption.*] Yes, he is. I thought I had better check.

Let us think how much more the minds of those brave Ukrainian men and women who are currently fighting for their lives and their country will be put at rest, so that they can focus on saving Ukraine, if we make it easier for their family members to come here and live in peace.

The Government love to talk about how generous, marvellous and munificent they are, but their claims just do not stack up. At Prime Minister's questions, the Deputy Prime Minister referred to this "big-hearted" Government. They really do need to be patted on the

back, don't they? It is about the rights of refugees and our moral duty. We have heard the comparisons for the numbers of Ukrainian refugees we are taking in and also that it is not a competition. We have been slow on the uptake and our numbers are low. As others have mentioned, the Prime Minister said at last week's Prime Minister's questions that the UK had

"done more to resettle vulnerable people than any other European country since 2015."—[*Official Report*, 9 March 2022; Vol. 710, c. 318.]

That is not true.

Let us look at the numbers per head of population, because that is the only way to make a fair comparison. For every 100,000 people, Sweden takes in 1,619; Germany takes in 1,274; Austria takes in 1,134; and Switzerland takes in 955. For every 100,000 people, we take in 121. That makes the UK 17th—sometimes 18th—in the rankings in Europe. But no European country can top the list, because in terms of displaced people globally, more than 80% of the world's refugees are in developing countries, which are the countries with the least money. The Government really do need to stop saying things that can be proven not to be the case.

Huw Merriman *rose*—

Anne McLaughlin: Madam Deputy Speaker, do I have time to take an intervention?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Yes.

Anne McLaughlin: Do you know what? I think I won't—I'll just carry on. [*Laughter.*] Thanks for that.

I want to come to my final concern. Having served on the Nationality and Borders Bill Committee, I am well aware of this Government's attitude to refugees. I am well aware that, as I said, they are being dragged kicking and screaming. Look at the warm words we heard for the Afghans who were fleeing; eight months later, most of them are still in those hotel rooms. Let us imagine the Ukrainians who come now being stuck in hotel rooms. We may think, "Fine, we know it's not going to happen, because they've said it's not going to happen," but why is it happening to the Afghans? What about the people who are hiding in Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iran who we promised to help? There are 102 people in touch with my office and I have nothing to tell them. And what of all the other countries?

In the 1940s, my grandmother, Sadie Purdie, lived with my granda, Stuart, and, at the time, three children, in a flat in Greenock. They had one bedroom, one kitchen living room and one dovecot. There were five of them squeezed in, along with three pet rabbits. Her brother, his wife and their five children were sleeping in an unheated wartime Nissan hut, along with many other homeless families, and life was unbearable, so my granny insisted that they move in with her. So there were four adults, eight children and three rabbits in a two-room flat with a dovecot and an outside toilet. It is unimaginable, is it not? But do you know why she did that, Madam Deputy Speaker? It was because she needed to—because they needed her. The way she saw it, they could simply budge up. Why can we not do that? As we have heard, Wales and Scotland want to become super sponsors. Let us budge up and create room. We are a wealthy country and people need our help wherever they are coming from—and they need it soon, before something worse happens to them.

Let me finish by saying to the people who are opening their homes that it is wonderful that they are doing that but I want them to read up on the Nationality and Borders Bill. When they invite someone into their home, they will be emotionally invested in that person, whose trauma they will witness close-up. I want them to imagine that person, or someone just like them, arriving here after the Nationality and Borders Bill is enacted—if this Government get their way—and what being subjected to that law means. It means being offshored. It means being jailed. It means never being reunited with their husbands who are currently fighting for their country. I say to those people: rise up, protest and tell this Government, “Not in our name.”

3.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): I fully appreciate the fact that we are in very dark times. War in Europe is something we should never have expected to see again. However, it is my natural disposition to accentuate the positive. I am naturally somebody who is going to say that I am proud of the things this great country has done and of the constituent contributions from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Let me start at the end, unusually. The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) said that the Government “are not doing nothing”. I think that is called damning with faint praise. Like it or not, SNP Members are part of the United Kingdom and this is a collective effort on our part. We have focused on refugees in this debate, but the United Kingdom has provided a total of £400 million in emergency aid for Ukraine so far. It is about not just what we are doing to help people to come to this country but helping people in the country they are in now.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Eddie Hughes: I will give way in a few minutes. Just give me a chance to build up.

We have also supplied lethal weapons; Ukraine is at war. We are providing the weaponry that it needs to sustain its position. We have introduced financial sanctions to ensure that we are putting a squeeze on Russia, as it is important that there is a military and a financial aspect to this war. I am very proud that we have 1,000 troops on standby in neighbouring countries, helping those people who are fleeing.

Anne McLaughlin rose—

Eddie Hughes: If the hon. Lady will bear with me, I need to courteously give way to my hon. Friend on the left.

John Howell: I thank the Minister very much for giving way. May I add some other good news to his portfolio of good news? This country led the way yesterday in the Council of Europe unanimously to expel Russia, and it did so at the Committee of Ministers meeting this morning, and the Russian flag has now been pulled down.

Eddie Hughes: That is fantastic news. I particularly thank my hon. Friend for his contribution to that effort.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you normally have the peroration at the end of the speech, so I am sorry for starting with it, but this is the final point of my opening remarks. Tens of thousands of people have already signed up to our Homes for Ukraine scheme. I am delighted to say that 7,000 of them have come from Scotland—these are not official figures, but the ones that I managed to squeeze out of the Department earlier.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East also said that the Government needed a pat on the head when they feel that they are being generous. This is not the generosity of the Government—this is not our money. This is the generosity of the British people. This is the generosity of Scottish households. Seven thousand of them have come forward to open up their homes, and we should welcome and embrace that idea.

The hon. Lady also said, as did several other Scottish contributors, that the Government needed to be dragged kicking and screaming to this, and that it is against our better judgment, which is kind of weird when we have introduced an uncapped scheme. We are not putting any limits on the number of people who are coming here despite what Members might think from what they have heard from the SNP Benches so far.

I will now get back to my actual speech. I start by saying a huge thank you to everyone who has gathered and contributed to the debate today. The contributions, which I will come on to, possibly in detail—time allowing—later, show the strength of feeling that exists in this House and the importance that we all place on getting this right and doing the right thing by Ukrainian refugees.

As we meet today, thousands of Ukrainians are at the border of their country, trying to escape the horrors of war. They are overwhelmingly women, children, and the elderly—mothers, daughters, wives, and grandmothers. They are people left with no choice but to leave the country that they love. They are exhausted, distraught and desperate. Some have queued in traffic jams for 20 miles—the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) referred to a case of someone who queued for 40 miles. Others have boarded trains that are packed to the rafters. Many have watched in horror as their homes and cities have been destroyed by Putin’s bloody invasion. This unprovoked invasion is bringing about a humanitarian crisis on a scale that we have not seen in Europe since the end of world war two, with the United Nations estimating that some 4 million people could end up fleeing their country.

Members across this House are determined that we, as a country, should open our arms to these people, and this determination has been on full display today. The scenes of devastation and human misery inflicted by President Putin’s barbarous assault on what he calls “Russia’s cousins” in Ukraine have unleashed a tidal wave of solidarity and generosity across the country. British people always step forward and step up in these moments, and since the first tanks rolled into Ukraine, they have come forward in droves with offers of help: community centres have been flooded with critical supplies; the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain has received millions in donations; and charities such as the Red Cross have been overwhelmed with people giving whatever they can. The outpouring of public support has been nothing short of remarkable.

[Eddie Hughes]

While this Government, and this whole House, have risen to the occasion with our offer of support to Ukrainians fleeing war, our lethal aid and our stranglehold on economic sanctions on Russia have clearly shown that we will keep upping the ante to ensure that Putin fails. As Members have argued today, it has been abundantly clear in recent days that we can and must do more. It is exactly right, therefore, that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities set out on Monday the new and uncapped sponsorship scheme, Homes for Ukraine. It is a scheme to allow Ukrainians with no family ties to the UK to be sponsored by individuals or organisations that can offer them a home. It is a scheme that draws not only on the exceptional good will and generosity of the British people, but one that gives them the opportunity to help make a difference.

As Members across the House have recognised today, the answer to that call has been truly emphatic. It sparked a Glastonbury-style rush to register to help, which did, temporarily, crash the website. Since Monday, more than 130,000 have stepped forward to offer an empty room or an empty home.

I appreciate that people are gathering for the statement, but I just want to briefly touch on the comments of some Members. My hon. Friends the Members for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) talked about support for local councils. Obviously we will provide £10,500 per person, plus additional funding for education. Clearly, there are roundtable discussions ongoing with local councils and local resilience forums to ensure that they are well prepared for the arrival of these people. They will be responsible for going out and checking that the accommodation is of an appropriate standard and helping with those vital safeguarding concerns.

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) and the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) would clearly like to see visas scrapped, but, in the meantime, they will be delighted to know that the Government have stepped up efforts to provide extra support to ensure that we can handle 13,000 appointments per week, which will dramatically surge the number of people that we are processing, as the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), mentioned.

The right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) asked us to work with the devolved Assemblies. Now, I mentioned the figure for Scotland, but I also understand that the number of applications from Wales for the Homes for Ukraine scheme is 9,000 so far, so we need to ensure that the system works and that those people can serve the purpose for which they have signed up. We will be working closely with charities to ensure that the support is provided right across the country.

Finally, one Member also raised concerns about those people who are coming with disabilities. As the disability champion for our Department, this is clearly something that I am particularly concerned about. We will work

with local councils to ensure that the provision that is necessary—the support that needs to be provided for those people with disabilities—is available when they come to this country.

I wish to conclude, in this dark time, on a very optimistic note. At a time when the British public were needed to come forward and to open their hearts and their homes, they have done so emphatically—more than 130,000 homes have been offered so far. These are exciting times in terms of the contribution that we can make as a country to support the people of Ukraine at their time of greatest need. Slava Ukraini.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House once more condemns President Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine and the war crimes being perpetrated by the Russian state there; reiterates the House's solidarity with Ukrainians in their resistance to Russia's invasion of their sovereign state; recognises that Europe is now seeing the largest movement of refugees since the second world war, for whom the UK shares responsibility; warmly welcomes the significant and widespread offers of support for those fleeing the invasion from people and organisations across the UK; supports expansion of the family visa scheme and Homes for Ukraine scheme; and calls on the Government to go further and faster in its response, including waiving requirements for Ukrainians to apply for visas in advance of their arrival in the UK so as to facilitate speedy access to international protection here, working with international partners to ensure vulnerable people can be resettled here and providing full and sustained funding and safeguarding to support people to rebuild their lives.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This will take one minute and 30 seconds. It is important that the public realise that sometimes, when the House is not packed, it is not because it is not interested in what is happening. Today, there are Ukrainian MPs in the Palace, and hundreds of MPs have gone to see them. The last debate was very important and well attended, and those speaking in it made their constructive points in a very sensible way. We should, though, make the public aware that there were other things going on in the House at the same time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I am happy to give him a direct answer. First, I agree with him entirely. It was noted earlier this afternoon that although we were having an extremely important and topical debate about Ukrainian refugees, the Benches were sparsely occupied. It is important to note—the hon. Gentleman put this very well—that in another room at that very moment, there were four Ukrainian Members of Parliament, who are most welcome here. Many colleagues, rather than being in the Chamber, had gone to that meeting, which I gather was extremely fruitful.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I will not take any further points of order, as it is 3.30 pm. I hand the Chamber to Mr Speaker.

Iran Detainees

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on the release of British nationals from detention in Iran—and, in parallel, on the repayment of the International Military Services debt. After years of unfair and unjust detention by the Government of Iran, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anoosheh Ashoori have, this afternoon, finally been allowed to board a plane and leave the country. They are on their way home. They will land in the UK later today and will be reunited with their families. Morad Tahbaz has also been released from prison on furlough. I know that the whole House and the whole country will rejoice at this news, and share in the relief that their horrendous ordeal is over.

Nazanin was held in Iran for almost six years, and Anoosheh almost five. Morad has been in prison for four. Their release is the result of years of tenacious British diplomacy. I want to thank our Omani friends and Minister Badr for their help in bringing our nationals home. I pay tribute to the efforts of many in this House, particularly the hon. Members for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), and for Lewisham East (Janet Daby). I pay tribute, as well, to my predecessors, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who have all worked hard to resolve this issue. Most of all, I want to express my admiration for the incredible resolve and determination shown by Nazanin, Anoosheh, Morad and their families. I have been in contact with them throughout, as have our specialist consular teams. Their suffering has moved us all, and so does the prospect of their being reunited with their loved ones once again, after this long and cruel separation.

We secured the release, and Morad's furlough, through intense diplomatic and political engagement at every level. We stepped up these efforts over the last six months. On becoming Foreign Secretary in September, I made resolving the issues of the continued detention of British nationals and the IMS debt personal priorities. In my first week, I spoke to the families of the detainees and met my Iranian counterpart, Minister Amir-Abdollahian. This was the first in-person meeting of a UK and Iranian Foreign Minister in three years. We agreed to work together to resolve the two issues in parallel. I dispatched a team of Foreign Office negotiators to hold intensive discussions with senior Iranian officials, in order to secure the release of our detainees. Officials travelled to Tehran for negotiations in October and November. A final round of negotiations took place in Muscat in February, resulting in this agreement.

Our ambassador in Tehran, Simon Shercliff, has also been in constant talks with Iranian Ministers and seniors officials. I spoke to Minister Amir-Abdollahian in October to progress the talks. In December, I met Minister Badr and secured Oman's assistance in this important work. In February, I held discussions with Minister Amir-Abdollahian again, to drive the talks to a final conclusion. We will continue to push, with partners, to secure Morad's permanent release and return home, which is long overdue. We will continue to support other British nationals in Iran who have asked for our help. We will work closely with our international partners to urge Iran to end its practice of unfair detention. It remains,

and always has been, within Iran's gift to release any British national who has been unfairly detained. The agonies endured by Nazanin, Anoosheh, Morad and their families must never happen again.

Our efforts to settle the IMS debt have also reached their conclusion. After highly complex and exhaustive negotiations, the more than 40-year-old debt between International Military Services and the Ministry of Defence of Iran has now been settled. As the House is aware, this debt relates to contracts signed with the Iranian Ministry of Defence in the 1970s. Following the revolution of 1979, those contracts could not be fulfilled. I pushed officials to be as creative as possible in finding a way to resolve the situation, and they have worked round the clock to find a viable payment route. We have considered and exhausted many options in the process. I can tell the House that we have found a way to make the payment in full compliance with UK and international sanctions and with global counter-terrorism financing and anti-money laundering regulations. A sum of £393.8 million has now been paid, which will be available only for humanitarian purposes. The terms remain confidential to both parties. We have long said that we would find a solution to the IMS debt. Now, thanks to the tireless work of our officials, we have found a way to do so.

The repayment of the debt, in parallel with the release of our nationals, reflects steps taken by both the UK and Iran to resolve issues of serious disagreement between our two countries. We will continue to stand up for our interests, for the freedom and security of our nationals wherever they are, and for an end to arbitrary detention. But for now, to Nazanin and Anoosheh, I am pleased that in just a few hours' time we will be able to say: welcome home. I commend this statement to the House.

3.36 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for giving me advance sight of the statement. For too long, the Iranian Government have been depriving British nationals of their liberty to use them as political bargaining chips. Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe has been detained in Iran for almost six years. Anoosheh Ashoori has faced the same fate for almost five years. The suffering they have endured during those years is unimaginable. The moments of laughter, joy and hope that they and their families have lost are irretrievable. The Iranian Government are entirely to blame for these acts of cruelty. The whole House will be overjoyed that their detention has now come to an end, and that Nazanin and Anoosheh can return to British soil to be reunited with their families and take the breath of freedom once again. We must pay tribute to their tireless families, who have shown extraordinary strength, resilience and courage in the face of an unimaginable ordeal.

I also give credit to my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) for all her efforts over so many years, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) for continuing to raise these issues. I give them credit for their tireless work in campaigning to secure the freedom of their constituents. We join the Government in thanking the Government of Oman for their help. I also give credit to the tireless work of British officials, as well as to the Foreign Secretary for her role in securing justice. She has shown

[Mr David Lammy]

more skills in diplomacy than her bungling boss, who appeared to do more damage than help while he held her current post.

Serious lessons need to be learned from this appalling episode. We need stronger international measures to combat the use of arbitrary detention as a political tool and to end hostage diplomacy. We also need a review of these cases. We need to understand what could have been done by the British Government to secure these releases sooner. I note that the Foreign Secretary said that she had

“stepped up these efforts over the last six months.”

I give her credit for that and welcome it, but I want to ask her what efforts were not taken by her predecessors that could have been. A review must also consider whether comments made by Ministers contributed to the extended detention. It is also good news that Morad Tahbaz has been released on furlough. Can the Foreign Secretary elaborate on the next steps to support his case? We note that other British nationals are still in detention and seeking help from the British Government. Can she update the House on the latest number and on what efforts are in place to help them?

We welcome the Government's parallel announcement that the IMS debt has been repaid. We have long called for the Government to find a way to pay back that internationally recognised legitimate debt. What guarantees have the Government been given that this sum of money will be used only for humanitarian purposes? Today, though, let us focus on the main point of this statement. The whole House and the whole country can share in the triumph of welcoming Nazanin and Anoosheh home.

Elizabeth Truss: There have been years of effort and some fantastic people in the Foreign Office, including the leaders of the Foreign Office and the Foreign Office team, have worked tirelessly. What has changed in the past six months is that we have a new Government in Iran. I was able, when I went to New York in September and met Minister Amir-Abdollahian, to reset the relationship and be clear that we were serious about resolving the outstanding issues that Iran had, and the Iranians were clear that they were serious about resolving the outstanding issues we had.

I pay tribute to the fantastic Foreign Office officials, who have been tenacious in travelling to Tehran and getting this done in what are very difficult circumstances. As the right hon. Gentleman is aware, paying money to Iran is not easy with the intensive sanctions regime in place, even though this is very clearly a legitimate debt. I can assure him that we have humanitarian guarantees. What I cannot do is go into the details, because that is confidential between the parties, but I have had this thoroughly checked out across Government to ensure that we have those guarantees that the money will be used for humanitarian purposes.

On the subject of Morad Tahbaz, who I spoke to at the end of last year when he was in prison, we have secured his release on furlough.¹ He is now at home. That was an important point that we pressed with the Iranian Government. I know from speaking to him that the conditions in prison were abhorrent and appalling, so he is now in better conditions, but of course we will continue to get him home, as well as other detainees who do not want their names released in public. The

other point to make about Mr Tahbaz is that he is a tri-national with the United States, so we need to work with our US partners on this issue and we are talking to him.

In the spirit of what the right hon. Gentleman said about welcoming the detainees home, that should be our focus today. They have been through an appalling ordeal; I could not imagine what it would be like to be without my family or my mother for so long. We must give the families the privacy they deserve, and thank them for their tenacity through this appalling ordeal that should never happen to anyone.

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

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am hugely grateful for the extraordinarily welcome news that my right hon. Friend has brought to the House this afternoon. It is the most wonderful moment for many of us who have been campaigning. In particular, I pay huge tribute to not only the two hon. Members for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) and for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), but our friend Ann Clwyd, who spent an awful lot of time campaigning for this as well when she was in this House.

May I ask whether the Government have looked at some of the implications of the last time a ransom payment was made to the Iranian Government? That ransom payment was made by the US Government a number of years ago. About six months after they were paid, the Iranian Government took another six American dual nationals hostage and merely started the whole process again. Furthermore, sadly, the money paid was then spent on murdering hundreds of thousands of Sunni Muslims in Syria. Can my right hon. Friend assure us that that will not happen this time, that British citizens will be carefully warned of the dangers they face in visiting Iran, and that none of the payment will end up in weapons and ammunition to kill Syrians?

Elizabeth Truss: First, it is important to note that these are two parallel issues in our bilateral relationship, namely settling the IMS debt—a legitimate debt that the UK Government were due to pay—and settling the issue of the detainees. I am very clear that we need to work with our international partners to end the practice of arbitrary detention. In fact, we are joining a group with the Canadians and others to do just that, so we have a strong international response to countries using the practice of arbitrary detention to get their own way. I completely agree with my hon. Friend that we must end the practice, but we need to do so working with partners. That is a key point that we are discussing as part of the G7 Foreign Ministers track.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson, Alyn Smith.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for sight of her statement. Goodness, in a week when we could all be doing with a bit of good news, I was very glad to read it. The SNP shares the happiness at the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, Anoosheh Ashoori and Morad Tahbaz. We also pay tribute to them, their friends and their families for putting up with an intolerable situation. This has been a long time coming, and there are lessons to learn, but the

1. [Official Report, 18 March 2022, Vol. 710, c. 12MC.]

Foreign Secretary, her Ministers and officials deserve their moment on this. This has been a great achievement, and I am very glad to see it happen.

We have the news that the historical debt will be paid as humanitarian aid, and, as I proposed that in this place on 16 November 2021, I can hardly quibble that it has happened, and I am glad of the assurances that it will go to humanitarian purposes. I will take that on trust, which we are all entitled to do. I have two questions. First, how many dual nationals are in Iran in this situation? We are aware that there are some, but we do not know how many specifically there are. What wider assessment is there of other dual nationals in this position elsewhere?

I echo the concerns of the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), that there is a risk of moral hazard. I think we are all agreed that this is historical debt that needed to be repaid, but others could take other lessons. What assessment has been made of the risk of moral hazard to British citizens going to Iran, but also in other places of risk? Perhaps the Foreign Office guidance needs to be updated in those situations. I would be grateful for an update on that, too, but congratulations.

Elizabeth Truss: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, I am afraid I cannot comment on individual cases, even to the extent of talking about the number of individual cases; I am afraid I cannot do that. He is right that we need to work against arbitrary detention. The best way to do that is as part of an international compact. That is why we are addressing this issue at the G7, and that is why I welcome the Canadians' leadership on the issue. I have met my Canadian counterpart on several occasions and talked about how we move this forward to change the incentives. We need to fundamentally change the incentives for Governments, so that there is not an incentive to behave in this way.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): I salute the leadership of the Foreign Secretary on this issue. As I know from my own experience, this is a fearsomely difficult diplomatic challenge, and it would not have been solved without sustained, personal interest right from the top, and she deserves great credit for that. Most of all, I commend the efforts of Richard Ratcliffe, Nazanin's husband. His quiet courage, his humility and his total determination never wavered throughout six years of hell, and he really was the bravest person I met during my time as Foreign Secretary. He is an inspiration to many people. Is the Foreign Secretary inspired by the united western response to the crisis in Ukraine, and is there something we can learn from that to unite as democratic countries to stamp out the vile practice of hostage taking?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about Richard Ratcliffe and the families of the detainees, and the courage they have shown in the face of appalling adversity, as well as those detained themselves, who have gone through incredible hardship, difficulty and just not knowing what the future would look like.

I pay tribute to the work that my right hon. Friend did when he was Foreign Secretary and the leadership he has shown on this issue in his current role. He is completely right, and that is why we are working with

allies, such as the Canadians, on unfair detention, because we need to take a common stance. The way that we have worked together on Ukraine—on sanctions and on supplying defensive aid—shows that we can do this in other areas, standing up for freedom, democracy and the rules-based international order, and changing the fundamental incentives that such regimes have in terms of the way they behave.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): This is really a day of celebration for Anoosheh's family. They will be so relieved when the plane hits the ground and Nazanin and Anoosheh are walking again on British soil. As Anoosheh's Member of Parliament, I am thrilled beyond belief at his release, and for Nazanin. I am incredibly happy for Anoosheh's wife, Sherry, and his children, Erika and Aryan, as well as their families and friends. I spoke to Sherry today—indeed, I spoke to her yesterday as well—and she told me that she has had several years of heartache and separation, all of which could have been avoided.

It is right that the issue of the long-standing debt of approximately £400 million was addressed and returned by the British Government to secure the freedom of our British citizens. I salute and thank the Foreign Secretary for making the IMS debt her priority. I also say, however, that it has been more than 1,650 days since Anoosheh was detained—days of his life that cannot be returned to him. I therefore ask her why it has taken the Government so long to secure Nazanin and Anoosheh's release.

Elizabeth Truss: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her tireless campaigning on the issue. I share her sense of anxiety. There were some very anxious moments this afternoon as we waited for wheels up in Tehran. As the plane departed, we knew that, finally, our detainees—Nazanin and Anoosheh—would be returning to the United Kingdom. We are very much looking forward to welcoming them later today. I, too, have spoken to the family and to Sherry. I know how hard it has been for the families and the courage that they have shown over these very difficult years.

What I will say about the process of securing the release of our detainees is that Foreign Secretaries, the Prime Minister and Foreign Office officials have worked tirelessly on it. There is a very dedicated team at the Foreign Office. Last summer, we saw a new Government in place in Iran, which gave us an opportunity to start afresh on some of the issues and to look at new ways we could do things in terms of paying the IMS debt, and we have been able to deliver on that.

We have to remember, however, that fundamentally it was the Iranian Government who put those people in detention. Ultimately, what we need to do, as many hon. Members on both sides of the House have said, is change the incentives for Governments so that taking detainees unfairly is not seen as a proposition in the modern world. I pay tribute to Foreign Office officials who have worked tirelessly for years to make it happen.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): The daughter of Morad Tahbaz is my constituent. I pay tribute to the Foreign Secretary and her team for all their efforts. Can she assure me that she and her team will continue to work with the US to ensure that he may leave Iran? Can she tell me what being on furlough from prison practically entails?

Elizabeth Truss: The Tahbaz family and I have spoken today. It is a very difficult situation. Morad Tahbaz is of course a tri-national—US, UK and Iranian—and the Iranian Government treat him as being a US national as well as a UK national. We pushed very hard to get Morad out of prison. I spoke to him when he was in prison and he was in appalling conditions. I am pleased to say that I have been in touch today and he is now back at his house—with security in place—with his family in Tehran. We will continue to work to get him back home. We will be working with our allies, including the United States, to make that happen. I am pleased, however, that we have been able to secure his release from prison and his return home in Tehran.¹

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I think we have all been quite emotional today. Tears of joy will, I hope, be cried this evening. To think that Richard Ratcliffe will be able to welcome Nazanin and that she might even put Gabriella to bed or take her to school tomorrow for the first time—what a thought.

We were told for a long time that the £400 million that has been paid as a legitimate debt was not linked. I am glad that it has been paid and that, in any way, it has led to the detainees' release. That is not an insignificant sum in terms of official development assistance spend, so can the Foreign Secretary assure me that it will not count towards our ODA spend and that it comes on top of other planned spending?

Elizabeth Truss: I can assure the hon. Lady that this comes from the Ministry of Defence. It had a long-standing debt that it has paid, in accordance with the international rules, including ensuring that this money is going to be spent on humanitarian purposes. I am pleased that Richard and Gabriella, who are in the Gallery today, will be able to see Nazanin again this evening. I pay tribute to Richard and Gabriella for their fortitude in such appalling circumstances.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): At a time when we are every day reminded of the amazing resilience of a country, this is a great moment to be reminded of the resilience of individuals and families—in particular the families of the detainees who are coming back this evening. What an amazing achievement by everybody involved! It would be fair also to thank the new Iranian Government for their role in this as well.

Will my right hon. Friend confirm whether there are any lessons that we need to learn about dual nationals and advice given to them in travelling, not just to Iran but to other countries? Will she confirm whether the agreement that she has reached with her Iranian counterpart provides some form of pathway for other British detainees in Iran eventually to return, too?

Elizabeth Truss: Of course we will look, as we always do, to make sure that our travel advice is as good as possible. When I met my Iranian counterpart in September, I was clear that there were key bilateral issues that we needed to resolve, namely the detainee issue and also the IMS issue. Of course, we do not agree with Iran on many topics and we are not naive about the situation in Iran, but we need to absolutely make sure that we are protecting our British nationals. That is my top priority and that is what I will continue to work to do.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): After six years, I can mention Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe in the Chamber and not beg for her release. After eight urgent questions and countless debates, it is a pleasure to finally be standing here and talking about her. This would not have happened without the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for Europe and North America, the right hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly). Can I say thank you from the bottom of my heart? Thank you also to all the FCO officials, who I know worked tirelessly to make this happen.

I also want to thank Redress, Gibson Dunn, change.org, Amnesty International and the other organisations and individuals who worked so hard to release Nazanin. On behalf of Richard Ratcliffe, who texted me just before I stood up, I thank all the MPs across the Chamber because, whichever side of the House they are on, everyone worked hard to make sure that Nazanin was released. Whichever party and whichever constituency you represent, thank you—and thank you from Richard Ratcliffe as well. That includes all the MPs who visited Richard when he was on both his hunger strikes. I thank the community—especially in west Hampstead, where Nazanin's home is—for always coming and supporting us.

Most importantly, I want to pay tribute to my constituent, Richard Ratcliffe, for his relentless campaigning. I also think that he has really set the bar high for all husbands. I say to Nazanin: welcome home, after six long years! I say to Gabriella that, this time, Mummy really is coming home.

I finish by asking the Foreign Secretary—I say once again how very grateful I am to her—whether she can update us a bit more on why Morad Tahbaz was not allowed to leave Iran. He actually lived in my constituency as well when he was in the UK, so I would like to hear an update on that.

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the hon. Lady for her tireless campaigning, and also for her patience in the last 24 hours. She and I have had a number of conversations, and it was only when we heard that the wheels were up in Tehran that we really knew it was happening. I was just extremely concerned to make sure that Nazanin and Anoosheh had really been able to leave Iran, and I am so delighted that we are going to be able to welcome them home today and that the families are going to be able to welcome them home today.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right about Richard and Gabriella, and about the other families who have campaigned so tirelessly, and it has been an incredibly difficult time. She is also right to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe—he is now the Minister for the middle east, Europe and Russia, because he is so talented and gets so much done—who has held countless meetings to make sure this happens, and it has not been an easy process.

On the subject of Morad Tahbaz, the real issue is that he is a tri-national, and that is seen in Iranian eyes as meaning that the US is also involved. We are working very closely with the US, and we have secured his release from prison. Of course, we want to see him come home, and we will continue to work to achieve that with our US partners.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend, all the team at the Foreign Office and the legal team who I know will have

1. [Official Report, 18 March 2022, Vol. 710, c. 12MC.]

worked extremely hard, and I thank everybody, including hon. Members, for their tireless work. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that, in our adherence to the international rules-based system by paying the debt that it was adjudged we owed to Iran, we shall not waver in our belief that the arbitrary detention of nationals of whatever country is wrong and that we must redouble our efforts if we are to defend effectively the international rules-based system that she and I know is under unprecedented attack?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. and learned Friend is right that arbitrary detention is completely wrong. We are stepping up our efforts, together with our G7 colleagues, to work more closely together to challenge that type of behaviour internationally. Over the Ukraine crisis and the abhorrent invasion of Ukraine by Russia, we have seen the international community step up and democratic nations work together. We are determined to address all of those issues, including the issue of arbitrary detention.

Mr Speaker: I now call the person who mentioned this every Thursday, Valerie Vaz.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Can I start by thanking the Foreign Secretary for all her work and her Minister, who answered all the urgent questions, as well as all the officials at the FCDO throughout the six years? I know my hon. Friends the Members for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) and for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) are delighted to get their constituents back, but there will be none more delighted than the Ratcliffe family—we all met the wider Ratcliffe family during Richard's hunger strike—and Anoosheh's family. The birth certificate of Morad Tahbaz, which I have seen, shows that he was born in Hammersmith, so I hope we can make extra efforts for him, but I would also like to ask the Foreign Secretary if she will ensure that Mehran Raoof, even though he may not have asked for help, is not forgotten. Mr Speaker, this was House business, and the House is delighted that Nazanin and Anoosheh are back in the loving arms of their families.

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the right hon. Lady, and I can assure her that every single British national who is unfairly detained overseas is on our minds, and we are working to see them released.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): The Foreign Secretary has rightly received many plaudits for the work that she and her team have done. The people of South Ribble have been writing to me since I was first elected in 2019 urging her and her team to strain every sinew in difficult circumstances. It is not often that they can all go home from work putting such a smile on that little girl's face. Will the Foreign Secretary join me in saying thank you from South Ribble for their efforts?

Elizabeth Truss: This has been a team effort, and as we have said, we have seen incredible fortitude and stoicism from the families and those detained in Iran themselves, and all of our constituents have of course been so deeply concerned about the terrible plight that Nazanin and her family have faced.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I add my congratulations to the Foreign Secretary for her tenacity and determination in resolving these issues. I hope she shows the same tenacity and determination in her

negotiations to resolve the issues affecting Northern Ireland as well. I did not know the families, but I met Nazanin's husband once outside the Foreign Office when he was conducting his hunger strike. He told me of the ups and downs, with hopes being raised and dashed continually. I am sure that the work done by the Foreign Secretary and her officials has given great help to those families who now have their loved ones released and hope to those still looking forward to having their family members released. I know that she had to link the payment of money to the release of these hostages, but has she any concerns that linking those two things together might send out the wrong signal to criminal regimes across the world who have no hesitation in using humans in this way?

Elizabeth Truss: On the right hon. Gentleman's first point, I assure him that I will not give up until I have fixed the Northern Ireland protocol. These long-standing issues with Iran have been treated in parallel. I have been clear, and the Government have been clear, that this is legitimate debt that the UK Government should pay. That is right, and that is what we have done. We found a way of doing that despite the various sanctions regimes in place, and we have made sure that it is spent on humanitarian support.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): It is excellent news that three British nationals have been released from Iranian prisons today. I met Richard Ratcliffe, Nazanin's husband, several years ago at a reception hosted by you, Mr Speaker, in this place to hear directly of her plight and detention, so I am delighted that she has finally been released and is on her way home. I congratulate my right hon. Friend on all her work. Will she confirm that her Department will continue to support other British nationals in Iran who have asked for our help?

Elizabeth Truss: We will continue to support British nationals in Iran. All the families have been provided with consular support and support from our officials, and I am proud of the support that they have offered. Of course, we will continue to work to ensure that those unfairly detained can return home.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): This is brilliant, excellent news. I thank the Foreign Secretary for her statement and congratulate the hon. Members for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) and for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on the work that they put in. Can she give us any indication of when she expects Morad Tahbaz to be released? Being on furlough is not a satisfactory situation, and he obviously has the right to return to this country, as do others.

The Foreign Secretary mentioned that she cannot name all the dual nationals or British nationals being held. I understand that, but one in particular—Mehran Raoof, a labour rights activist—has been publicly named by Amnesty International and by Redress, and he is apparently on a long-term prison sentence. What efforts are being made to secure his release? In the changed relationship that we now have with Iran—that is welcome—will there be a robust human rights dialogue? Detention of foreign nationals is appalling, but many other human rights issues deserve to be and must be raised with Iran. I hope that this will be the start of a serious dialogue, which hopefully will improve the human rights of everybody.

Elizabeth Truss: On the individual whom the right hon. Gentleman named, I must respect the individual's request of whether their case should be raised in public. That is why we mention publicly only those individuals who have asked to be named. Of course, we continue to supply support to all British nationals who have been unfairly detained. As I said, there are many issues over which we do not have agreement with Iran, but I will continue to talk to the Iranian Foreign Minister and work with him to ensure that we do resolve issues between us that pertain to the British national interest.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): This news is like sunshine on a rainy day. Congratulations to all involved. Does the Foreign Secretary agree with me that particular tribute needs to be paid to Sayyid Badr and the Omani Government, who are establishing themselves as interlocutors and mediators par excellence in the region? Will she say what assurances she has got that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps will simply not replace Nazanin, Anoosheh and Morad with other dual nationals? Will she reiterate her warnings to dual nationals who may fall within the Iranian jurisdiction that they should tread very carefully indeed?

Elizabeth Truss: Minister Badr and the Omani Government have been incredibly helpful in assisting us with this issue and I want to pay tribute. They flew the detainees out to Muscat. I have been in regular touch with Minister Badr since I first met him in December last year and they have been instrumental in making this happen. They are true friends of the United Kingdom. My right hon. Friend is right in what he says about dual nationals, but fundamentally we need to change the incentives on the system so people can travel freely without fear of unfair detainment.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): May I join other Members in thanking the Foreign Secretary, her officials, my two hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) and for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), and everyone who has brought this wonderful day to pass, made all the sweeter by the smiles we see looking down on us from the Gallery? The Foreign Secretary said that the debt was paid in parallel, but we all know that for the Government of Iran it was always sequential. Given what she said about the work she is doing with other G7 members, including Canada, to try to deal with this, what practical steps is she hoping to secure through that to ensure that in future it is much, much more difficult for Governments to engage in hostage-taking for political purposes?

Elizabeth Truss: The right hon. Gentleman is right that we need to change the practice of countries detaining other countries' nationals unfairly. That is precisely what we are working on with our Canadian counterparts and others, but we need to act in concert to change the system and change the reactions we give overall. I cannot say more at this stage, but I hope to be able to say more soon.

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): This is a day of great joy and relief, not just for those flying home today but for their families, some of whom it is wonderful to be joined by today, and their wider families, including members of the Zaghari-Ratcliffe

family who live in my constituency. I pay huge tribute to all involved, including, of course, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and the Opposition Members who have done such a tremendous job on behalf of their constituents. There will be many lessons wrongly drawn from this sad episode. Can I suggest to my right hon. Friend that there is one lesson that could be correctly drawn? The fact that these people were imprisoned in Iran is the fault of the Iranian regime. The difficulties that the UK Government have faced repaying the IMS loan are also the fault of the Iranian regime, because they largely relate to sanctions imposed upon the Iranian regime. Is this a lesson of wider application in the world today that if you find yourself subject to international sanctions, you will find that there are long and expensive consequences?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. and learned Friend makes a very effective point about sanctions. What we are seeing today in Russia—the fact that the Government of Russia are struggling to finance their appalling war in Ukraine, the fact that people are struggling to secure the goods and services that they have become used to, and that the country is being returned to something akin to the Soviet era—shows that sanctions do work and are effective.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The joy and relief will be felt by all our constituents who have been fully behind Richard Ratcliffe and the families getting their loved ones home. Given that there has been a solution in plain sight which the Foreign Secretary has been able to use today, does she agree that it should never again take two hunger strikes, the terms of three Prime Ministers, five Foreign Secretaries and five Ministers for the middle east to get a solution for people in this situation in future?

Elizabeth Truss: This is an issue that the Foreign Office has been working on tirelessly for many years. Given that there was a new Government in Tehran last summer, there was an opportunity to reset the relationship and start working on the issues afresh. We took that opportunity, but we were able to do so only because of the tireless work of Foreign Office officials. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) pointed out, it was not easy to pay the IMS debt in the current scenario. We found a way to do it, and I am very pleased that we have done so.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The plaudits that my right hon. Friend is receiving today are richly deserved, and she and the other Ministers and officials deserve the warm applause of the House. She says that she cannot go into all the details of the humanitarian aid, but can she assure us that it will be humanitarian aid that Iran will spend in-country? The definition of humanitarian aid will change; we know that Mr Putin is calling for allies in the middle east to help him in his "humanitarian" work in Ukraine, and we need to make very certain that these sums are not deployed in that arena.

While I have my right hon. Friend's attention, as she has a magic wand to solve very long-standing problems, will she now turn her attention to Libya, and to redress for the victims of IRA terrorism in Libyan-sponsored atrocities?

Elizabeth Truss: I can assure my hon. Friend that the definition of humanitarian aid in the agreement is certainly not the definition of humanitarian aid to which Vladimir Putin would subscribe.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I know the joy that my constituents in Lewisham West and Penge will be feeling at today's news. I thank the Foreign Secretary for her work.

I had the privilege of meeting Richard Ratcliffe when he was on hunger strike last winter. His dignity, courage and resolve were humbling, but I recall his frustration over delay after delay after delay. A mother and their child should never be separated for all these years. The Foreign Secretary must ensure that lessons are learned so that, as she says, it never happens again. I would be grateful for her comments as to how she intends that to happen.

Elizabeth Truss: We are all very pleased that the families are able to be reunited. In dealing with the issue, on which I have been working since I became Foreign Secretary in September, there are a lot of complexities. There are difficulties in working, given the sanctions regime and given the process that needs to be gone through. Hours and hours have been put into the meetings, the phone calls and getting this right. Right up until the last minute, which came at 1 o'clock this afternoon, it has been touch and go. There is an incredible amount of complexity lying underneath what we have to do and what our counterpart Governments have to do to effect these types of change, but I am very clear that we have some excellent officials who have really done the business on the ground in Tehran.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe and North America on their work in delivering this in short order after such a long period of frustration, as well as those colleagues who have been campaigning for it. Richard Ratcliffe must feel unalloyed joy today that the love that he has shown to his wife has allowed him to campaign through adversity to deliver this day. I therefore pay tribute to him completely.

As people are dying in Ukraine to fight for freedom, we are learning a lesson that surely has application here: when states behave beyond the rule of law, we need to act swiftly and immediately isolate them with sanctions. If the unlawful taking of prisoners in a case like this ever happens again, the west must unite—the whole world must unite—in immediately bringing sanctions against those countries such that the pain they feel outweighs any gain they think they may receive.

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend is entirely correct. That is why it is so important that the west and the wider free world have stepped up in the Ukraine crisis. For too many years we did not do enough, and blind eyes were turned to some egregious practices. For that reason, as well as working together to impose sanctions on Russia for its appalling actions in Ukraine, we are working together on the issue of unfair detention to ensure that we protect the rules-based system and defend freedom and democracy around the world.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): This is very good news, but it is not the end of the matter. Even if the Foreign Secretary will not discuss individual cases, she will be aware that a number of UK citizens and dual nationals are still being held in Iran, some of whom, for good reasons, will not be as well known as Nazanin. Will she meet the relevant Members of Parliament and the families whose relatives are still detained in Iran, and what leverage does she think she will have now that the debt has been paid?

Elizabeth Truss: Of course I will continue to meet the families of detained individuals, and I will continue to work to get those people released from unfair detention.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): The Foreign Secretary is to be commended for achieving this joyous outcome, but will she join me in commending the thousands of ordinary people across the United Kingdom who do not know Nazanin or Richard or Anoosheh personally but have stood firmly with them throughout all these years, and have kept us MPs honest by pursuing us relentlessly, urging us to raise the issue in Parliament and engage with Richard in his hunger strikes and other efforts? Does that not show that it is always worthwhile for members of the public to engage with an issue, however complex that issue may be?

Elizabeth Truss: This issue has touched the hearts of the British public, as we all know from what we have received in our postbags. Who could fail to be moved by the courage and tenacity shown by the families, but also by the suffering that has been undergone by those who have been unfairly detained and those who have been separated from them for so many years? It is clear from the offers of homes for Ukrainian refugees that the British public are big-hearted, and want to see our citizens thrive and to see these families reunited.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): May I add my congratulations and thanks to the Foreign Secretary and her team, and in particular to my hon. Friends for their tireless campaign and to Mr Ratcliffe, whom I have met on several occasions in difficult circumstances?

We know that Iran is a difficult and multi-layered country with which to have dealings. Moving beyond today's announcements, may I ask whether there is any hope that it might progress towards a more accommodating arrangement with the rest of the world, and that we might be able perhaps not to normalise but slightly to improve relations in the long run?

Elizabeth Truss: In resolving the issue of the IMS debt and resolving the issue of these particular unfairly detained people, we have dealt with two of the major issues facing the UK and Iran. Of course we have very large concerns about the possibility of Iran's acquiring a nuclear weapon, and we are currently working with partners to prevent that from happening, because we know where it can lead when a nuclear state poses a danger to the world. That is our focus: working with partners, and, of course, engaging directly with the Iranian Government, as I have done.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): May I, too, thank the Foreign Secretary, and also her predecessors, who have been badgered for many years, and particularly

[Mrs Flick Drummond]

for the last six? I am so pleased that she made this one of her priorities. May I also pay tribute to the families of Anoosheh and Nazanin, especially Richard Ratcliffe and the family, whom I met outside the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office during the hunger strike?

Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking the British negotiating team in Tehran, who have been working so hard to get the three British citizens released, and may I ask whether she thinks that this is the beginning of a new relationship with Iran for the long term?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right to pay tribute to the family, to Richard Ratcliffe for all his campaigning work and to our negotiating team, who have worked day in, day out, including in Tehran and Muscat, to get this done—that has been really important.

The future of Iran is a choice for the Iranian Government. We do not want to see Iran acquire a nuclear weapon; we want to see a world in which Iran plays a more positive role. Of course, we will work to encourage a more positive trajectory.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I thank the Foreign Secretary for her welcome words on arbitrary detention, which go to the heart of it. Of course, arbitrary detention is not the sole preserve of Iran. It is also a common practice in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where it is reported that there were a further three executions today while the Prime Minister was in the country. Can the Foreign Secretary give me some assurance that we will pursue the issue of arbitrary detention and other human rights abuses with equal vigour wherever we find them?

Elizabeth Truss: We approach our relations with all countries without fear or favour. We are prepared to be honest with countries about human rights practices, which is exactly what the Prime Minister has been doing on his visit. It is important that we engage with Saudi Arabia. We have a major issue, as everyone in this House knows, with a very aggressive Russia threatening European and, indeed, global security, and we need to work with other countries to find alternative sources of oil and gas. It is important that we deal with everybody.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Today is a day of celebration, albeit tempered by the recollection of the suffering endured by Nazanin, Anoosheh, Morad and their families over a long period. Some people may be concerned about the parallel payment of almost £400 million, so will my right hon. Friend reassure the House that this money was legitimately owed to Iran and that nobody should be under any misapprehension that this Government would pay ransoms for people who are illegally detained anywhere in the world?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right. We have always been clear that this is legitimately owed money that the UK should pay. Due to the complexities, this has been a difficult issue. We have been challenging in looking at ways to pay the money, ensuring of course that it is spent on humanitarian purposes—that has been critical. We have found a solution to resolve that issue.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Like other hon. Members, I am truly delighted at the release of Anoosheh and Nazanin. I pay tribute to Richard, who has been a tower of strength in this whole unfortunate saga. I congratulate the Foreign Secretary on her role, and I congratulate her creative civil servants who found a way to repay this historical loan.

As we often say, where there is a will there is a way. That has certainly proved to be the case, but may I ask about the role of the Government of Oman? I understand from the Foreign Secretary that the Government of Oman played a very positive role, but has the role been such that the money was transferred to Iran via Oman's central bank?

Elizabeth Truss: Our Omani friends have been extremely helpful in working with us to help transport the detainees between Tehran and the United Kingdom, and in working with us on some of the practical arrangements. We have, of course, also had direct contact with the Iranian Government, but the partnership with Oman has been truly successful in helping this to happen.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): I congratulate the Foreign Secretary on her work to secure the safe release and return of Nazanin. Iran's malign influence remains a threat to British interests in the middle east and to the interests of our allies, most notably Israel. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that any new agreement on Iran's nuclear weapons programme prevents it from acquiring nuclear weapons?

Elizabeth Truss: It is correct that we have very strong concerns about Iran's ability to acquire a nuclear weapon. That is why we have been working so closely with our allies, through the joint comprehensive plan of action, to get a new deal to stop that acquisition. That is vital. We want Iran to take a different path—a better path. That comes through a combination of being absolutely clear what the penalties are—the sanctions—and having a positive choice that Iran can make about its future.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I warmly commend the Foreign Secretary and all her team, both ministerial and her officials, on this result. Apricity means the feeling of the sun on one's face in winter, and I am sure that for Gabriella and for Richard today is a day of apricity, with sun on their faces in a time of winter. However, authoritarian regimes such as those of Iran and Russia do two things very similarly; arbitrary detention, which the Foreign Secretary has already spoken about; and pumping their propaganda around the world, through state-funded broadcasters. In Iran's case, that is Press TV—thank goodness it has not got a licence here any longer. Anyone who has taken money from Press TV should be giving it back. Should exactly the same not apply to Russia Today? Is it not time RT was closed down, so that we stopped hearing the propaganda from Russia about Ukraine? Shouldn't everyone who has taken money from RT give it back or give it to Ukrainian refugee support?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Gentleman is right about state-funded propaganda and the fact that we do not see a free media in many parts of the world. In some cases, social media is breaking that up; we have seen some of that in Russia, although it is now being cracked

down upon. That is one reason why the Government have established the information unit: to help give the Russian people the truth about what is happening in their own country. I know that my right hon. Friend the Culture Secretary is looking at precisely the issue he talks about and I am sure she will be listening carefully to his question today.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): This is the most joyous of days for this House and the country, and for a family who have missed Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a wife, a mum, a daughter and a sister-in-law. In Newport West, this case is personal, because Richard Ratcliffe's sister, Rebecca Jones, is a constituent of mine, and I have watched in awe as she fought to get Nazanin home, alongside the rest of the family. I say to the Minister that for all the joy today, a case like this must never happen again. So will she ensure that lessons are learned so that no other family has to go through such a dreadful separation from a loved one in the future?

Elizabeth Truss: I congratulate the hon. Lady's constituent on the work she has done to campaign for Nazanin's release. The hon. Lady is right: we cannot let this happen again. This needs to be about what we do as the United Kingdom and how we work with our international allies to make sure that there are not incentives in place for these regimes to carry out arbitrary detention.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is right and proper that the House congratulates the Foreign Secretary and the ministerial team on delivering on real diplomatic action—it is great to see. We congratulate the hon. Members for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) and for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) on a job well done as parliamentary representatives; it is a great honour to sit in any Parliament and that is the job of an MP. We also congratulate the families, who are watching. I was interested to hear the Foreign Secretary talk about arbitrary detention and how we can work with other countries to ensure that not only dual nationals or tri nationals, but full UK nationals are not arbitrarily detained, no matter our friendships with countries. Further to the point raised, I believe, by the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), who is no longer in their place, the Foreign Secretary said that they would be meeting families who are detained. In that spirit of collaboration and working together, will the Foreign Secretary consider meeting me and the family of Jagtar Singh Johal to understand the issue of arbitrary detention for other states? It would be a most welcome deliberation for the future.

Elizabeth Truss: As I said, I have raised this specific case, but I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss it further.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The American academic Margaret Mead famously said:

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”

So well done to the Foreign Secretary, her Ministers and her Department, and to my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) and for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), whose work on this has been indefatigable. I do not want to strike a discordant

note, but in relation to what the shadow Foreign Secretary, the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) have said about this deal, I think all of us in Parliament would be happier if there had been some briefing and scrutiny, even on Privy Council terms.

Elizabeth Truss: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. We do have an arrangement, and it was part of the very careful negotiations that have taken place over the past six months that this deal would be kept confidential. We have the humanitarian assurances on the IMF front and I will see what I can do within the bounds of that. However, the United Kingdom is a country that keeps its word and we have given our word to keep this confidential.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): This is a good day. The release of Nazanin and Anoosheh is extremely welcome news, and I thank the Foreign Secretary and her officials. I pay tribute to the families for their bravery, courage and resilience. I did not want to have to see Richard go on a third hunger strike. Given the length of time they were detained, and the fact that other dual nationals continue to be detained in Iran, how will the Foreign Secretary ensure that the Government learn lessons from these cases, including in relation to the provision of consular services for UK nationals and their families more generally?

Elizabeth Truss: We have seen some very good consular services in these and other cases. The lesson to be learned is the broader lesson about arbitrary detention and how we work with our allies and partners to stop it. I will update the House on the progress of the arbitrary detention work that we are undertaking with the Canadians. We first discussed this back in November at the NATO Foreign Ministers summit, we discussed it again at the G7 meeting, and we are making some real progress, so I would be happy to have further discussions in due course.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Earlier today, I asked the Deputy Prime Minister whether the Prime Minister had ever asked anyone to urge the security services to revise, reconsider or withdraw their assessment of Lord Lebedev of Hampton and Siberia. He replied that the suggestion was “sheer nonsense”. But this afternoon the Prime Minister's former chief adviser has stated in writing that the Prime Minister was told that the intelligence services had “serious reservations” but “cut a deal” to provide the Commission with a “sanitised” version of the advice. The ministerial code requires Ministers to correct the record if they inadvertently mislead the House, as the former Downing Street chief of staff has alleged. So can you tell me, Madam Deputy Speaker, whether you have had any notice from the Deputy Prime Minister that he intends to come to the House to correct the record, and if not, can you advise me about how the House can get to the truth of this very serious issue?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her point of order and for giving me notice of it. As she will know,

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

the Speaker is not responsible for ministerial answers. She is quite correct that the ministerial code requires Ministers to correct any inadvertent errors. Those on the Government Front Bench—I am looking to the Whip and to the Ministers—will have heard her comments, and if an error has been made in this instance, I hope that it will be corrected speedily. Of course the Minister concerned may take the view that there is no inaccuracy. I am quite certain that the right hon. Lady will find ways to pursue the matter in any event.

Cost of Living Increases

4.39 pm

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House warns that households will soon be suffering the worst income squeeze since the 1970s; notes The Institute for Fiscal Studies analysis that households are on course to be £800 worse off; calls on the Government to scrap VAT on energy bills, implement a windfall tax on companies which are benefitting from significantly increased profits as a result of impacts associated with the covid-19 pandemic or the current international situation, and to scrap the energy bill rebate scheme and introduce immediate emergency cash payments for households.

A phrase said to me many years ago has stuck with me, and I believe it is true for this debate on the cost of living crisis: “Poverty is a punishment for a crime you didn’t commit.” For so many people now—in Aberdeen, Scotland and across the United Kingdom—there is a real feeling of helplessness, hopelessness and powerlessness at the situation before them. Their food, fuel and energy prices are soaring, as is the price of their children’s clothes; no matter which way they turn they cannot escape the grim reality of the situation before them.

This issue cuts across all sectors of society. Just yesterday at the Dispatch Box the Chancellor was extolling the virtues of the employment figures going up. That is of course good—everyone irrespective of political party would welcome it—but he did not address the fact that for those in work, energy prices will be some 14 times what their pay rise might be; he did not even acknowledge that that was a fact. Furthermore, he did not address, let alone reflect on or apologise for, the fact that, just a matter of months ago, he took some £20 of universal credit out of the pockets of those who are not in work and are reliant on the state for social security to get by day to day.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): On deductions by the state, it is not just the £20 uplift but the fact that hundreds of thousands of people across these islands have £60 taken off them every month in Department for Work and Pensions deductions, some of them advances and some of them so-called tax credit overpayments.

Stephen Flynn: Absolutely; my hon. Friend is a doughty champion on these causes and makes his point extremely well, and it would be remiss of the Government not to listen to him. He is right to touch on that, as we all are right to touch on the cost of living crisis, because it is a crisis: it is a crisis for households up and down the country.

What we need from the Government in a time of crisis is a response. We need them to take action to improve people’s lives—to protect them, and to insulate them from what is coming down the road—but, sadly, they have been completely lacking in that regard. I am sure that in their hearts of hearts many Conservative Back Benchers—although just a few are present today—recognise that the Government can and must go further, because all we have seen at this stage, despite the exponential increase in the price cap, which could well reach about £3,000 a year by the autumn, is £150 towards a council tax rebate.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the price cap, but even before that consumers across the country are facing massive increases in the standing charges, something for which there should be no link to the cost of energy. It is reported that this is because we are having to fund the supplier of last resort as a consequence of the failure of the small energy companies; does the hon. Gentleman share my sense that it is wrong to expect consumers to pick up the tab for what is essentially a regulatory failure?

Stephen Flynn: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's intervention and he is absolutely right. The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change is present and I am sure he will address those remarks if he comes to the Dispatch Box later, as I see that he will.

It is not just the money towards the council tax rebate that the Government have put forward, of course, because they have gone so much further: they have given people a buy-back loan for their energy bills—buy now, pay later. That is the best they can do in this time of crisis, and of course that was predicated on the basis that energy prices would reduce over time but the situation has changed and many experts and analysts now suggest that is not going to happen. So the Government need to get real on this matter.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a point about energy price increases, which will be devastating for many families, but people who live in off-gas-grid areas will be crucified by the price increases, because they rely on bottled gas, oil or wood, all of which are going up in price, and they are of course currently using more of that expensive energy. Does my hon. Friend agree that this Government need to take action now to adopt regulation for people who live off the gas grid, so that they are treated more fairly and before there is a crisis for rural communities?

Stephen Flynn: Absolutely—I could not agree more wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend on that. He makes an extremely important point, which he has been making for many months, and it is time the Government listened and took action in that regard.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Would the spokesman and his party now agree that we need to get a lot more gas and oil out of the North sea, which would generate tax revenue that the Treasury could use to ease the squeeze, instead of paying huge sums of money to Qatar and Russia for liquefied natural gas?

Stephen Flynn: The right hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. Of course, he will be cognisant of the fact that when the oil and gas comes out of the ground it goes into the hands of multinational countries. Do we want to be in a situation in which that gas benefits us here, rather than those abroad? Absolutely. Should we be importing from Russia? Absolutely not, and the Government have been right to take action on that. Nevertheless, what I want to see from his Government, which he should want too, is a turbocharging of investment in renewables. When are they going to come forward with their energy security strategy? I have heard talk about it in the paper, but there has been no clarity whatsoever. I shall come back to that later in my speech.

John Redwood: Most of my constituents still have gas boilers. Renewables will work one day, but the immediate crisis is that we are short of gas. Do we have our own or do we have foreign gas? If we have our own, we get tax revenue.

Stephen Flynn: It is interesting to hear that we are short of gas when I regularly hear the opposite from the Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change. That is the important point: Government Members can try to disagree with their own Government on these matters, but in real terms we are self-sufficient. Scotland is self-sufficient when it comes to oil and gas, but we can and must go so much further on renewables. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to hang around, he will hear me speak about that in due course.

Drew Hendry: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for generously giving way again. Is it not the case that Scotland, which is a net exporter of energy—I think we produce around 153% of our needs over the course of a year—would have been able to do much, much more had this Government not stood in the face of more cheap, reliable and green renewable energy by standing for many years against allowing solar and onshore wind power when it came to the contracts for difference? We could have been much further ahead. Is it not now this Government's responsibility to help people with the cost of living crisis, which they and the energy price increase have caused?

Stephen Flynn: Yes, absolutely. The reason why we are in the current situation is that the Government have not planned ahead. They have chosen to sit on their seat when they should have been looking to where we could go in future. I hope the Minister will address that point when he sums up the debate.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): As my hon. Friend knows, when the price of oil goes up, the tax yield to the UK Exchequer is increased; when the price of a gallon of petrol goes up, there is extra duty for the UK Exchequer; and when the price of domestic bills goes up across the board, there is additional VAT for the UK Exchequer. Does he not find it passing strange that Tory Back Benchers are not calling for the additional tax yield that the UK Government already have to be used to reduce the cost of domestic bills?

Stephen Flynn: Absolutely. As I understand it, the Treasury currently believes it is going to take in excess of £3 billion in relation to oil and gas in particular. Every single pound and penny of that £3 billion should be directed towards the provision of support for families up and down the country.

It is on that support that I wish to briefly reflect. We know the Government have gone nowhere near far enough in terms of their support for households up and down the country. What can they do? What should they be doing? We know that they should be scrapping VAT on energy bills. We know that they should be reversing the national insurance price hike—a tax that will impact not just households, but businesses, too. We know that they need to turn those loans that they have forced on people into grants, and we know that they need to overturn that £20 cut to those on universal credit. People need help, and they need help now. The Chancellor cannot continue to stand still as if nothing at all is happening.

[Stephen Flynn]

When we discuss these things, the Conservatives often say, “Well, what are you doing? What are the Scottish Government doing?” Without getting into the technicalities of who has powers over law and where resources lie, because, of course, we know that those are the responsibility of the UK Government, it is worthwhile reflecting on what we in Scotland are doing differently to what this UK Government are doing.

We are, of course, in the middle of a fuel crisis, but an older or younger person living in Scotland can hop on the bus for free. A person in Scotland who is struggling with their health can rest assured that they will continue to get free prescriptions. A family worried about how they will feed their wee bairn will know that there are funded hours in nurseries where they will be fed, and that when they go to primary school, they will receive free school meals. With the limited welfare powers that the Scottish Parliament has, the Scottish Government not only introduced the game-changing £10 Scottish child payment, but are doubling it in a matter of weeks to £20 a week. Those are huge differences in policy objectives and intentions, and they are designed to assist people. Yet, at the very same time, we still have the dead hand of Westminster above us, forcing us to spend some £600 million each and every year just to mitigate its policies, such as the bedroom tax. We can and should be able to do so much more, but we are held back by this UK Government and their complete intransigence.

Another question that this Government rightly ask is: “You have quite a wish list there, how do you fund it?” That question is justifiable, which is why we have come forward today not just with problems—problems that we are all aware of irrespective of party—but with solutions, too. Is it right that Serco, Amazon, Netflix and Asos are able to benefit from the pandemic to the tune of billions of pounds because of the way that people’s habits have changed and because of the contracts that they have received from the Government while our constituents are struggling? Absolutely not; it is not right at all. That is why we are calling for a broad windfall tax—one that takes into account the changing landscape in the UK and globally so that we can respond to it to provide people with the support that they so badly need, and which is so badly overdue.

I accept—I think everyone in this Chamber accepts—that, ultimately, such a mechanism is for today; it is not necessarily for tomorrow. What do we do next year? What do we do the year after that? That takes me back to the point that the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) stumbled into earlier in relation to renewables. We are very much in this mess not just because of Brexit, not just because of the pandemic, but because of the energy policies, over decades, of this UK Government. What they need to do is come forward with a clear and concise plan as to how they intend to turbocharge renewables: hydrogen; hydro pump energy storage; onshore wind; offshore wind; solar; and tidal. Scotland has the resources. Scotland has the ability to deliver that energy security not just for people living in Scotland, not just for people living in the rest of the UK, but for our friends and allies in Europe who need that energy security now more than ever. We need the Government to come forward with that plan and to do so now.

Finally, as I said earlier, food prices and fuel prices are soaring. When will the UK Chancellor finally set down his silver spoon, pick up his cheque book, and deliver the support and security that people so badly need?

4.55 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Helen Whately):

It is an honour to take part in this debate on behalf of the Government. Let me begin by reassuring the House that we in Government recognise the challenges that many households, including of course in Scotland, face with the cost of living. That is one reason why we have provided support worth over £20 billion across this financial year and next; why we are cutting the universal credit taper rate and increasing work allowances to make sure that work pays; why we are freezing fuel and alcohol duties to keep costs down; and why, last month, we announced a £9.1 billion package to help households with rising energy bills.

Given the many steps that we have taken to protect jobs and livelihoods over the last two years, no one can reasonably accuse this Government of failing to act. There was £400 billion of direct support to the economy during the pandemic, including for the furlough scheme, which protected literally millions of jobs. As our focus turns to the economic recovery, we are allocating £600 billion to gross public sector investment over this Parliament, growing the economy, and improving the lives of people up and down the country. That, as much as anything, is the story here. We have supported people, we are supporting people, and we will continue to support people. We are also determined to create the conditions, Union-wide, for them to thrive.

As the global economy has reopened following the disruption of the pandemic, inflation has risen around the world. Global energy prices have increased as factories have scaled production back up, and there is increasing demand, while supply has been disrupted. There has been a further sharp rise in global energy prices following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Goods prices have also risen, with global supply chains struggling to meet demand as the world economy recovers. These global factors are the main drivers of higher inflation in the UK.

In that context, we understand that some households, particularly those that are vulnerable, need support with the cost of energy. We have introduced measures to provide exactly that. For instance, the winter fuel payment provides older people with £200 towards their energy bills; it is £300 for those over 80. There are also cold weather payments. Together, those measures provided almost £2.5 billion in support to households last winter. This year, we are increasing the generosity of the warm home discount, and expanding its reach to 3 million households.

The motion mentions VAT on energy bills. Domestic fuels such as gas and electricity are already subject to a reduced VAT rate of 5%, but as the Chancellor told the House in February, a further cut to VAT on energy would disproportionately benefit wealthier households. There would also be no guarantee that suppliers would pass on any reduction to all customers, and the cut would become a permanent subsidy, worth £2.5 billion every year, at a time when we are trying to rebuild the public finances.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): The Minister talks about helping people. How would she categorise the increase to national insurance contributions?

Helen Whately: I just mentioned the importance of rebuilding the public finances. We know that the NHS is the No. 1 priority for the general public; it is vital that we reduce the backlogs that sadly built up during the pandemic, and that needs to be paid for.

To come back to the motion, last month we announced an additional package of support to help households with rising energy bills, worth £9.1 billion—a package that, according to the motion, the Scottish National party wants to scrap. Our package to help people includes a £200 reduction in household energy bills this autumn that will be paid back automatically over the next five years, and a £150 non-repayable council tax rebate payment for all households in council tax bands A to D in England, plus £144 million of discretionary funding for local authorities in England to support households who need support but are not eligible for that council tax rebate. As we cannot apply these council tax measures across the whole of the UK, the devolved Administrations are receiving almost £600 million through the Barnett formula. This overall approach is fiscally responsible while helping customers to manage the unprecedented increase in energy bills and helping to spread the increased cost of global prices over time.

Stewart Hosie: The Minister mentioned global prices and I was rather struck that she sounded like Gordon Brown saying that it was always someone else's fault. It is absolutely true to say that there are global pressures causing inflation, but while some countries are capping their electricity price increases at 5%, we are allowing 50%-plus increases in domestic energy prices. For all the big numbers that she has read out, does she not understand that people cannot afford to heat their homes?

Helen Whately: We have the price cap in this country, which means that customers have been protected from the volatility in global energy prices over recent months. At the moment there is further volatility following the impact on those prices of Russia invading Ukraine, but that is not going to hit the vast majority of households' energy bills over the coming months. We will have to get to October to see the implications of that. What we have done—as I have just mentioned; I am sorry if the right hon. Gentleman was not listening—is put in place a support package worth £9.1 billion particularly to help those who will find it more challenging to pay their bills.

John Redwood: Over the last year, the economy has grown a lot faster because the Treasury did not hike tax rates but instead went for growth. That was a great policy, so why reverse it? Is there not a danger that these tax rises and massive increases in energy prices will slow the economy down too much? If that happens, the Government will have a revenue problem.

Helen Whately: If my right hon. Friend will give me a little time, I will come on to the importance of growth to our economy, which is the right answer for the longer term in ensuring that we improve people's standard of living.

Pressures on household finances are not generally the consequence of one single price rise; they are typically affected by an amalgam of different factors. Remedying the pressure on households therefore requires taking action on a range of fronts, not just on energy bills. Again and again, that is what this Government have done and are doing. We are acting in dozens of ways to support working families. For instance, over the winter, the £500 million household support fund has helped vulnerable households with the cost of essentials such as food, clothing and utilities. Local authorities in England have allocated the lion's share of that funding to ensuring that it reached those who needed it most, with 50% ring-fenced for households with children. Additional funding was allocated to the devolved Administrations, including the Scottish Government, in the usual way.

We have also reduced the universal credit taper rate and increased universal credit work allowances by £500 to ensure that work pays. This is essentially a £2 billion tax cut for the lowest paid in society. It is helping around 2 million households to keep an average of an extra £1,000 per annum in their pocket. Next month, the national living wage is increasing by 6.6% to £9.50 an hour, again benefiting more than 2 million workers and meaning an increase of over £1,000 in the annual earnings of a full-time worker on the national living wage. And we are committed to going further, so the national living wage will reach two thirds of median earnings for those over 21 by 2024, provided that economic conditions allow. We have supported working families in other ways too: doubling free childcare for eligible parents, which is worth around £5,000 per child every year, and introducing tax-free childcare, which will provide working parents with 20% support on childcare costs up to £10,000.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for what she is saying, and I welcome the £400 million that is going to Northern Ireland under the Barnett consequential. The Republic of Ireland has suspended VAT on fuel in the short term to try to address the issue now. Can I ask the Minister whether any discussions have taken place with the Chancellor to see whether that could be done for us here in this great United Kingdom?

Helen Whately: I am not sure I heard exactly the specifics of the hon. Gentleman's question, but in general there is already a lower VAT rate on fuel. Overall, however, if the question is whether we should have no VAT on fuel, the Chancellor has spoken about how that would in fact disproportionately benefit wealthier households, so it simply cannot be the right thing to do when it is the less wealthy households who face the greatest challenges in paying their energy bills.

The list of what we are doing in many different ways to help households goes on and on. Increasing fuel prices are indeed a global issue, not unique to the UK. The price of crude oil has increased sharply over the past year, increasing the price consumers pay at the pump. That is why we have taken action by freezing fuel duty; drivers are being protected by the 12th consecutive year of fuel duty freezes, with the average car driver paying around £15 less fuel duty per tank, saving them a cumulative £1,900 since 2011 compared with the pre-2010 fuel escalator.

On housing, the Government are maintaining the increase to local housing allowance rates for private renters on universal credit and housing benefit in cash terms.

[Helen Whately]

That increase was worth an extra £600 on average in 2020-21 for more than 1.5 million households. An additional £140 million has been provided this year for discretionary housing payments for those eligible for housing support who need extra help. All that is on top of existing support for families through the welfare system, which this year will add up to £240 billion of support, including £41 billion on universal credit and £105 billion through the state pension.

Turning specifically to Scotland, on top of our energy bill support scheme, which applies there, the council tax measure in England means the Scottish Government are receiving almost £300 million more than would otherwise be the case, which they can use towards cost of living interventions.

This Government will always do what we can to help those in need, and our actions speak for themselves, but we are also determined to help people to help themselves. The Government's plan for jobs is helping people into work and giving them the skills they need to progress and earn more, which is the best approach to raising living standards. The Government are building on the success of the plan for jobs with a total of £6 billion on labour market support for the three years to 2024-25, providing targeted additional support to help at-risk groups find work, including younger and older age groups, the long-term unemployed and people with disabilities.

Why are we doing that? Because we know that work is the best way for people to get on, to improve their lives and support their families, and because households on universal credit are at least £6,000 a year better off in full-time work than out of work.

Stephen Flynn: I mentioned earlier, and indeed the Minister will be aware, that energy prices for households are rising 14 times faster than any pay rise they may receive if they happen to be in work. What does she say to that? How is that a good thing for consumers?

Helen Whately: As I was outlining—I do hope the hon. Gentleman was listening—we have put multiple interventions in place to support people with the rising cost of living. Specifically on energy prices, on the one hand we have the price cap and on the other, the package of £9 billion in support announced literally last month, which his motion says he would like to scrap.

On top of everything we are doing to help people with the cost of living, we are helping people to help themselves through our plan for jobs, and that plan is working. The UK was the fastest-growing economy in the G7 last year, and the International Monetary Fund forecast, produced before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, was for us to be the fastest-growing major advanced economy again this year. Unemployment has now fallen to 3.9%, below its pre-pandemic rate, and payrolled employees are at a record high.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Will the Minister give way on that point?

Helen Whately: I will give way, because I am about to move on to talk about energy.

Matt Rodda: The Minister is obviously covering a range of issues, both employment and the cost of living for households. As the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) mentioned, is now perhaps the right time to look again at the national insurance rise, given the pressure on families and the stalling rate of growth?

Helen Whately: The Chancellor has already been asked about this, and the fact is that we have taken the difficult, fiscally responsible decision to ensure that there is a long-term funding stream, both to support the NHS to tackle backlogs and to fund the cost of social care reform. That has to be the right thing to do, going hand in hand with our determination to invest in growth in this country, which I will come to in a moment.

I will just talk for a moment more about energy. We have talked about the support for people's energy bills, but the best way to support people with the cost of energy is to tackle the problem at source and reduce the overall cost of energy in the UK, as well as reducing demand for energy, and we have already taken steps to do that. Our investment in renewables in recent years has already reduced our dependency on gas, meaning overall that bills are now materially lower than they would have been.

Looking ahead, now is the time for us to go full steam ahead with our transition to renewables. We are investing in nuclear. We are accelerating our progress on renewables, in which Scotland plays an important part, and we are boosting energy efficiency, investing more than £6 billion in energy efficiency measures over this Parliament, including £3 billion to install energy efficiency measures in low-income homes. That will save low-income households hundreds of pounds a year off their energy bill, as well as being a fabulous growth opportunity for our economy.

The motion we are debating today specifically mentions implementing a windfall tax

"on companies which are benefitting from significantly increased profits as a result of impacts associated with the covid-19 pandemic or the current international situation".

I am sure that SNP Members are talking about a windfall tax on North sea oil and gas. I say to them, and in particular the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn), that North sea oil and gas are important to our energy transition.

The UK Government place additional taxes on the extraction of oil and gas, with companies engaged in the production of oil and gas on the UK continental shelf subject to headline tax rates on their profits that are currently more than double those paid by other businesses. To date, the sector has paid more than £375 billion in production taxes. Those of us on the Government side of the House support the North sea oil and gas sector and its role in our energy security and our energy transition.

This Government have consistently acted whenever and however necessary to support families and businesses. It is our responsibility on their behalf to protect the public finances. Our level of debt means we are and have been vulnerable to shocks, including changes in interest rates and inflation. A sustained one percentage point increase in interest rates and inflation would cost more than £22 billion by 2026-27. Events in Ukraine are a clear reminder that there will always be the risk of further economic bumps in the road, and we must be ready.

To that end, as we come out of the pandemic, we must focus even more on boosting productivity, growth and investment across the whole UK.

We are focused specifically on the three priorities that the Chancellor outlined in his recent Mais lecture: capital, people and ideas. That will help us foster a new culture of enterprise and drive growth. The Government continue to support business through the temporary super deduction to encourage firms to invest in productivity-enhancing plant and machinery assets. We are committing to unprecedented levels of investment in ideas: increasing investment in research and development to £22 billion a year, reforming and improving our tax credit system, improving access to finance, and helping small businesses through our flagship Help to Grow programme. The £4.8 billion levelling up fund will invest in infrastructure that improves everyday life across the UK, while the £2.6 billion shared prosperity fund will support our wider commitment to level up all parts of the UK. In these cases, we have public investment crowding in private sector investment, which is what will drive the growth of our economy. The spending review also confirmed a total of £100 billion of investment in economic infrastructure over the spending review period. Together, that adds up to an extraordinary, and extraordinarily ambitious, programme of investment in the UK.

The Government understand that this is a challenging time for British households, including in Scotland. That is exactly why we have acted in dozens of ways on multiple fronts for the entire United Kingdom, but it is also why we are looking to the future, focusing on our economic recovery, on growth and on skills—elements that together will raise the living standards of millions of people all across the Union.

5.14 pm

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I am pleased that we are debating this important topic and I thank the SNP for bringing it to the Chamber again. Opposition parties have held a number of debates on the cost of living, which is critical for every part of the country.

The cost of living crisis really matters because millions of families across the UK face the hardship of not knowing whether they will be able to pay their bills. That worry plagued many when we spoke at the Dispatch Box on the topic in January, but in the interim, the Government have done close to zero to help. Listening to the Minister, everything in the country seems to be okay, but all her words will be no consolation to those who have to make the difficult decision about whether to heat or eat. That is the biggest single indictment of the Government to date.

In the intervening period, we have of course seen the most awful, barbaric and illegal invasion of Ukraine, which has not helped and has led to higher prices in many areas as a consequence. Yesterday, the Office for National Statistics revealed that average earnings fell 1% in the three months to January, which is the biggest fall in earnings in a decade. It is against that backdrop that working people face this crisis.

Although the Government may seek to convince people that the crisis is entirely the result of the war in Europe, the reality is that it long predates the Russian invasion. Let us be crystal clear with the public: the cost of living crisis for my constituents and every constituent across the country was with us in spades before Ukraine.

One of my constituents described the crisis as “everything going up” but his wages; energy bills are due to skyrocket next month with the lifting of the energy price cap and there might be much more to come later this year.

Matt Rodda: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point that a lot of the pressure on families predates the current crisis by some months. There are an enormous number of food banks across the whole of the UK—in Scotland and England—and my experience of working with constituents and those hard-working charities is that there is an enormous need out there that predates the crisis in Ukraine. I hope that the Government will listen to that point.

Ian Murray: My hon. Friend raises a critical point and we have to keep dragging the Government back to their responsibilities as a result of being in power. Much of the crisis in our public services, including the NHS and social care, also predates covid but the Government keep telling us that perhaps that is not the case.

Inflation hit 5.5% in January and is expected to rise even further. Scots are facing the prospect of council tax, water bills and train fares rising while wages, as I have said, are falling in real terms. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Conservative party failed to back the fully costed plans of the shadow Chancellor, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), to tax the oil and gas companies' excess profits to reduce people's energy bills. Instead, the Chancellor's response to the crisis has been to make matters worse, not better. We have already heard about the buy now, pay later scheme using taxpayers' money to lend money back to taxpayers via the energy companies that they will have to pay back on future bills. That is not helping; that is deferring the problem.

The Government have refused to exempt VAT on skyrocketing energy bills, which was supposed to be one of the much-vaunted Brexit dividends.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): When the Minister winds up the debate, I wonder whether he will address the point that, as the hon. Gentleman rightly alludes to, part of the energy cost is pre-Ukraine. We left the European Union and its single energy market, which is detrimental to the rest of the UK.

Ian Murray: Those are some of the consequences that we start to see when the chickens come home to roost.

When the Minister responds, perhaps he can also clarify the Government's policy on VAT on energy bills, because VAT is one of the most regressive taxes. By removing VAT on energy bills, the Government would remove a regressive tax that affects the poorest the most. I understand that if they remove the VAT, they help everyone, but perhaps it could be done temporarily and perhaps the £2.5 billion-plus, and increasing, that is taken from VAT on energy bills could be diverted to those who are required to pay higher energy costs.

There will be the largest tax burden since the 1950s, which is astonishing for a Conservative Government, and a more than 10% increase in national insurance, not just for working people but for businesses. We have a Conservative Chancellor who is high tax and the highest-taxing Chancellor in more than 70 years.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Do I understand rightly that Labour's fully costed windfall tax on the energy companies is opposed by both governing parties in Scotland?

Ian Murray: It certainly is. To correct the Minister—I hope it is not the third time already; I am on only the second page of my speech—she assumed that the SNP motion backed a windfall tax on oil and gas, but it is actually the opposite. The motion is not to back a windfall tax on oil and gas, but to back a windfall tax on everything but oil and gas—maybe the SNP can clarify that later.

This Chancellor is also presiding over the largest hit to disposable income since the second world war. How are any of those policies helping, alongside, as we have already heard, the largest ever overnight reduction in support for the poorest households through the reduction in universal credit and the scrapping of the triple lock for pensioners? They are making people poorer and taking more money out of their pockets at a time when everything is going up—a cocktail of Government decisions that mean the discussions around the dinner table for many families are about the worry of paying the rent, the mortgage or the energy bill or for the weekly shop or to fill the car they need for work.

Families face a perfect storm of the Government's own making: rising taxes, rising bills and rising inflation, and lower wages in real terms. This is all the result of over a decade of Conservative mismanagement of the economy. They like to think they have been in government only since 2019, but they have now been in place for 12 years. The policies of a succession of Tory Chancellors have created a low-wage, low-growth insecure economy.

I want to talk for a minute or two about the Scottish Government's role in this. As the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) rightly said when he moved the motion, the Scottish Government have a stake in this and I am grateful that the SNP has brought this debate to the House. The SNP is correct to point out the lack of action by the UK Government in trying to tackle this, as we have all discussed, but it is not an observer in this crisis as it is in government and can also help.

Scots are facing the prospect of higher council tax bills, because for over a decade the Scottish Government have decimated local government funding and spent 15 years promising to scrap the council tax—a promise that they continue to break at every election.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I find it particularly useful that the hon. Gentleman mentions council tax, given that the Labour administration in Midlothian proposed a 4.7% increase in council tax. Thankfully, the SNP amendment to that ridiculous proposal was accepted and that amount was reduced.

Ian Murray: We do not want to see council tax bills rising anywhere across the country, but my own council, the City of Edinburgh Council, has had £1 billion ripped out of its budget over the last 10 years by decisions to take Conservative austerity, times it by four and pass it on to local authorities. *[Interruption.]* I hear the cries of "What?" behind me, but these figures can all be checked. The 3% of Conservative austerity is multiplied

by four and passed on to our local authorities who are delivering these services. Councils are forced to make decisions that they do not want to make. *[Interruption.]* All those figures can be checked, Madam Deputy Speaker, despite the SNP Members chuntering from the back.

The Chancellor's measly council tax rebate scheme, while welcome at £150, will distribute more money to the Scottish Government, but the SNP response is just to reflect that entire policy. The Minister mentioned this. To put that into context, there will be £150 off council tax in bands A to D in Scotland, which means I will get £150 off my council tax. How is that fair? Of course, I will be donating it to local charities, but that policy is money wasted that should be directed to those who need it the most.

What of this one-off windfall tax on the unexpected cash bonanza for the oil and gas sector? The SNP group here in Westminster has been more interested in standing up for Shell than standing up for Scottish taxpayers. *[Interruption.]* Again, *Hansard* has all of this documented. When my colleagues and I put down a motion in this House for a vote on a windfall tax on the enormous excess profits of the oil and gas companies, the SNP sided with the Conservatives and failed to back it. In fact, the SNP BEIS spokesperson, the hon. Member for Aberdeen South, who is sitting not yards from me and who moved this motion, defended that position vociferously in this House. The deputy leader of the SNP did not back our motion on BBC "Politics Scotland", live on television, and the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) said:

"I am sorry to say that I have not heard anything to persuade me why a one-off smash and grab on the North sea industry is the best way to deal with this crisis."—*[Official Report, 1 February 2022; Vol. 708, c. 239.]*

Let us see what this crisis is doing. Shell's profits have quadrupled, in what its CEO has described as a "momentous" year, to an unexpected \$19 billion. That is \$600 a second in profit, driven primarily by the huge increases in energy prices. While Scottish families face the heartbreaking choice between eating and heating, the CEO of BP is describing the energy sector as a "cash machine" for his business. Under our proposals, he would be popping his corporate credit card in the cash machine, and giving a little bit of that money back to struggling families. Before both Governments—the Scottish Government and the UK Government—trot out the usual defence of harming investment, most of that unexpected profit is going to additional bonuses for shareholders in dividends and buybacks of shares, so such businesses will not be using that money for investment.

Now we see that the SNP, after weeks of defending not backing a one-off windfall tax to help Scottish people pay their bills, has its own proposal with one line in the motion about

"a windfall tax on companies which are benefitting from...impacts associated with the...pandemic or the...international situation".

Surely that means oil and gas. Does it mean oil and gas? Does the BEIS spokesperson want to intervene and tell us if it means oil and gas? *[Interruption.]* Nobody on the SNP Benches is saying it means oil and gas, so what on earth does it include? Will it not affect investment, if that is the defence for oil and gas, in other industries? Do they have any detail on how much that would raise, how it would be implemented or who would be impacted?

Does this include every business that has turned a profit during covid? What about small businesses such as the micro-breweries that turned their hand to making hand sanitiser during the pandemic—should they pay? What about Pets at Home, because of the boom in people buying pets during the pandemic? The critical argument is that these businesses' profits are not driven by the increases in energy costs that are hitting family finances directly. It is the oil and gas companies' profits that are driven by the crisis, and it is they that should pay a little more. It is their additional, excess and unforeseen profits that are directly linked to the rise in bills paid by millions of families, and I have yet to receive an intervention to find out whether the SNP motion includes oil and gas—nothing. Quite obviously, we can come to our own conclusion that it wants to tax Irn-Bru, but not tax oil and gas.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): Not that I am going to make a habit of trying to defend SNP Members, but one of the reasons why they may not include oil and gas in their windfall tax plans is perhaps that they watched the Treasury Committee hearing with a panel of independent experts specifically on the windfall tax, who said that it would be ineffective and would damage investment. It would be ineffective because BP and other oil companies actually make their profits elsewhere, not in the North sea, and as a result, the costings the hon. Member describes are not up to scrutiny or robust. Could he explain to the House how he has got to the figures he is putting forward as fully costed?

Ian Murray: Yes, if we increase the additional rate on the oil and gas sector from 40% to 50%—10 percentage points extra—that will generate the money towards our fully costed plan for raising energy prices, but very well done for defending the Scottish National party, and both the Conservatives and the SNP knocked back the oil and gas sector's windfall tax when it was brought to this House.

To go back to the central question of this debate on the cost of living crisis, many families are worried about the email dropping into their inbox telling them that a direct debit will treble, or the bill landing on the mat saying their energy bill will become unaffordable, yet both Governments refuse to ask the companies making the money, directly driven by the energy crisis and the energy prices that are generating those extra direct debits or those extra bills, to put a little bit more into the pot to help. With the SNP's current policy in the motion, and SNP Members still will not tell us if it includes the oil and gas companies, AG Barr, a successful Scottish business that made more profit last year than pre-pandemic, would pay a windfall tax, but the oil and gas companies would not—taxing ginger, not taxing gas.

Matt Rodda: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point because surely the point is that, with the super-profits for these very wealthy companies, senior leaders of a number of them have been quoted as saying that they see their own business as a cash machine. If we contrast that with the day-to-day struggles of people of this country, surely he is putting forward the right policy.

Ian Murray: Those with the broadest shoulders should pay the most, but I just say to everyone in the country watching this who is worried about their bills that we

have two Governments who could do something about this, but they are defending the profits of the oil and gas companies rather than trying to help them with their bills. We could achieve so much more if all put our shoulders to the wheel and helped with this energy crisis.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Member makes an excellent point. Does he share my curiosity about whether the SNP's problem is that it spent so much time saying that Cambo should not be developed and attacking the oil industry that it finds itself in a quandary and, as always, its main priority is what is the best argument for independence rather than what is best for the people of Scotland?

Ian Murray: If the SNP has an argument for not taxing the oil and gas companies, it can have the floor to tell us. I am happy to take an intervention. I am also happy to take an intervention that clarifies what their motion means. Does the line that says "a windfall tax" include the oil and gas companies? Not one SNP Member, including the BEIS spokesperson, will intervene and tell me that that is what it intends. That tells us all we need to know. The SNP is sitting on the fence, hoping that the Government get the wrong idea, and putting out the press release to say that the Government are attacking it.

Stewart Hosie: This is a serious debate affecting some tens of millions of families in the UK, so the sooner he stops wittering on about Irn-Bru and Pets at Home and makes a substantive point, the better for the viewing public.

Ian Murray: I make this substantive point. Your motion, which you brought to the House to debate today, says that you are happy to tax Irn-Bru and Pets at Home, but you are not willing to tell me whether you will tax the oil and gas companies. Am I correct? I am correct. Excellent.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Please do not use the word "your", because that is referring to me, and I am not doing anything.

Ian Murray: Apart from chairing the debate wonderfully, of course.

Let us make the serious point. We are debating the motion in front of us and we cannot get clarity from its mover about whether it includes a windfall tax on the oil and gas companies that would give every single household in Scotland £200 off their bills and the poorest 815,000 households £600 off their bills. That is what we are talking about. That is the substantive point that I am making.

Children will be going to bed cold or hungry—or both—and the best that the Chancellor can do is put up their parents' taxes and lend them their own money to take a tiny amount off their energy bills. It is simply not good enough. The Trussell Trust says that two out of five people on universal credit are forced into a spiral of uncontrolled debt. Labour's plan to tackle the cost of living crisis would put money in the pockets of Scottish families, helping them to make ends meet, and take worry out of receiving that unaffordable direct debit increase from their energy supplier. Across the UK—I repeat this again, because the right hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) wants a substantive point—we

[*Ian Murray*]

would introduce a fully costed, worked out plan for a windfall tax on oil and gas companies through which every single household in Scotland would get £200 off their bills and the 815,000 hardest hit households would get £600.

In Scotland, the Scottish National party has the power in its hands to do more than just bring Opposition day motions; it can change lives, too. That is what Labour would do. We would use the Barnett consequential that the SNP has spent on replicating the Chancellor's unfair policies to give a Scottish fuel payment of £400 to nearly 600,000 households facing the brunt of the crisis. We would top up the Scottish welfare fund so that local authorities could use their discretionary offer further to support households.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I am interested to hear about the shadow Secretary of State's proposals for Scotland. Has he had an opportunity to raise them with his colleagues in the Welsh Government, who have done exactly the same as the Scottish Government, whom he has criticised so heavily?

Ian Murray: The bottom line is that I should not be getting £150 off my council tax bill. That seems fair, and I think that we agree on that. We need much more imagination in how to get money into the pockets of the poorest who require it. The best way is to ask those with the broadest shoulders to put a little more into the pot. It is certainly not the whole host of Ponzi schemes reeled off by the Minister whereby people are lent their own money and will have to pay it back later. We need to implement long-term solutions to keep bills low such as improving the energy efficiency of Scottish homes and, as was mentioned, dealing with off-grid, which is a huge issue in Scotland.

That is a proper plan to tackle the cost of living crisis, unlike this back-of-a-cigarette-packet plan designed to help solve a political problem for the Scottish nationalists—who do not want to back a windfall tax on oil and gas but will not even tell us in public if that is what their motion is intended to do—or the Chancellor who is not only doing little to help but is costing people much, much more and making it worse. That is the difference Labour can and would make in power. We do not want just to oppose the Government in Opposition day debates; we want to replace them altogether, which the Scottish National party can never do.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I think Rosie Winterton, when she was last in the Chair, suggested between six and seven minutes, and then everybody can get in. We will try to do that without putting a time limit on.

5.35 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I think all parties in this House are very concerned about the cost of living for all our constituents.

First, may I tackle the situation of very high energy prices? I commend our Government on the amount we have put into green energy, offshore wind energy and

solar farms. We have many solar farms in my constituency. In fact, my constituents often say there are too many, but they contribute hugely to energy.

Christine Jardine: On that point, subsidies for renewable energy have been cut. Today, we are having to go to Saudi Arabia for oil and gas because the Government did not invest in renewable energy in this country sufficiently quickly. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is now time for the Government to step up to the plate and start doing a better job in that area?

Neil Parish: What happened with renewable energy, especially solar and wind, is that the price came down and we achieved a great deal of solar and wind energy without having to pump as much public money into it. That is very much a good thing and I commend the Government for what they are doing. The last Labour Government did nothing on nuclear power. The major nuclear power station at Hinkley Point, with two very big reactors, will produce 8% of our national need. That is the sort of thing that will solve our energy crisis and, in the long run, bring prices down. I also want tidal power at Swansea Bay and Bridgewater Bay to be reconsidered. I believe we are missing a trick there. We can produce very good energy from the second-highest rising tide in the world, so let us get going.

We have to recognise that at the moment energy prices are governed by oil and gas. What I would say to Her Majesty's loyal Opposition, as they wax lyrical about having a windfall tax on oil companies, is that we need our oil companies, including those off Scotland, to produce more oil and gas. Who is making the murderous intervention in Ukraine? It is the Putin regime. What does the Putin regime rely on? It relies on the money from energy from both oil and gas. Therefore, it is time for us to produce as much oil and gas as we can. I very much support renewables and the environment, but we have to wake up to the fact that we need to pump oil and gas out of the ground. Putting a windfall tax on those companies would reduce their ability to invest. I urge the Chancellor to look at taxing those companies more if they do not invest, and less if they do. Let us get that going.

I want energy costs to come down. The increase in the cost of energy, both gas and oil, for my constituents has been huge. I have a meat wholesaler in Axminster whose energy bills have gone up from £90,000 to over £300,000, so it is not just individuals who are affected, but businesses. That means the cost of food goes up. It all has a knock-on effect on the cost of living for all our constituents. Many of my rural constituents have to buy heating oil. One constituent has been given a price of 186p per litre. However much the price of crude oil has gone up, there is no justification for such prices. We need to look not only at the tax on fuel, but at what individual companies are doing and whether they can justify such huge increases in the price of fuel. The Chancellor could also look at VAT on heating fuel: it is only 5%, but if the price doubles from £1 to £2 per litre, that will mean 10p in VAT, so getting some of that back would help at least.

I turn to fuel duty. Petrol hit a new high of 163p on Monday, with diesel at a record 173p. The RAC says that filling a family car's 55-litre tank with petrol now costs more than £90 for the first time. Fuel duty is set at

58p per litre for petrol and diesel; VAT is 20%, which means 35p per litre of diesel and 33p per litre of petrol. The Chancellor will therefore have some leeway in his statement. There is no doubt that fuel and diesel costs hit everybody in this country, but they hit the rural population hardest, because the distances we travel to go to work or carry food around are all much greater. I very much support what the Chancellor and other Conservative Chancellors have done to keep duty down, but these are extraordinary times. None of us thought that we would see fuel rising to nearly £2 per litre.

Let me move on briefly to issues with the costs of farming and the costs to farmers. Some farmers have reported paying as much as 120p per litre for red diesel, compared with 73p a fortnight ago. I do not think that that 65% rise is justified, so please can we look at it very carefully? White diesel—derv—has risen by only 15% in the same timeframe. At 47p per litre, duty is lower for red than white diesel, while VAT is lower at 5%, so surely there is a case to be made that some suppliers are profiteering.

Nitrate fertiliser is now more than £1,000 a tonne, compared with £647 in January this year and £245 in January 2021, and the cost of urea, phosphate and potash is going up, so I hope that the Chancellor can see ways of helping food production. One of the issues in the terrible situation in Ukraine is that it is very much the breadbasket of the world, especially for the export of wheat. Wheat prices in this country are now at some £300 a tonne. To poultry and pig farmers, feed is an enormous cost, so those price rises will add to the cost of living and we will need to take them very seriously in the forthcoming Budget.

I commend the Government for their work to help those who are struggling to pay their bills. The cost of living crisis—and it is a cost of living crisis—is the one thing that hon. Members on both sides of the House know we need to face up to, and I believe that the Government are facing up to it. I look forward to the Minister's winding-up speech.

5.43 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): As the motion makes clear,

“households will soon be suffering the worst income squeeze since the 1970s”.

The Bank of England has said that inflation could reach more than 7% in April. Households' average energy bills are forecast to rise by 54%—almost £700 on average—and there is a very real fear that energy costs could rocket again by a comparable amount in October.

Let me put that in context. One in seven people in Scotland are already finding household energy bills unaffordable. That is 640,000 people, and equates to 7 million people across the UK. Whether the cause of these difficulties is simply inflation, the massive hikes in energy costs themselves, low pay or underemployment, the fact that 68% of working-age adults in the UK who are in poverty live in households where at least one adult is in work—the highest figure on record—speaks volumes about the Government's failure even to understand, let alone take seriously, poverty and what it means in this country. What else could explain their hiking national insurance contributions, removing the universal credit uplift, and allowing energy companies to impose brutal

increases on people many of whom were already having to choose between heating and eating? According to the Resolution Foundation, those ill-conceived policies could lead to a fall in real household income of £1,000 per year for working-age households.

Of course, what successive UK Governments have not done simply makes the situation worse. We have all seen—and have just heard about—petrol and diesel approaching £2 per litre, and in some cases it already costs more than that. That is £9 or £10 a gallon, which essentially means that it costs over £100 to fill up an average saloon car tank. That is prohibitively expensive for someone on modest wages who simply wants to fill up the car in order to get to work. Yet every Tory Government I can recall has set their face against a “fuel duty regulator”, which would at least have moderated some of these obscene increases. May I just respond to something that was said by the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray)? Let us remind ourselves that Shell alone made £4.7 billion of profit in the final quarter of 2021, and £14 billion in the entire year. So someone is doing very nicely out of these rising costs.

I now wish to turn to a slightly different energy-related matter. Yesterday I received an email from my constituent Elisabeth Walton. She wrote:

“I am writing to you as, being my representative in the House of Commons, I am hoping you will be able to seek an answer for people like me who have been unable to heat their homes as a result of rising prices. I live in an electric-only home, and chose so in an effort to reduce my reliance on fossil fuels.

While I have done everything in my power to reduce the amount I spend on heating (switching from a prepay meter, insulating windows, draught excluders, blankets and hot water bottles), as a single income household with a disabled partner I simply cannot turn on my storage heaters due to the sheer cost.

Could you please explain to me why, with such investment in renewable energy, that my electric standing charge could have more than doubled despite the only price rises affecting oil and gas...

Why is VAT not being cut? Presumably this is one of the actual benefits Brexit could offer us? What is the government doing besides forcing repayable loans onto us?

Why are energy business profits not being controlled to avoid the exploitation of powerless people?

Is there anything I can do to apply pressure to these companies and ease this hardship?

I have gone to my employer to plead for a raise or increased responsibility to meet this increase in living expenses, particularly as I continue to work from home, but this has been flatly denied.” This is someone who has already done everything she can, and yet is being hammered with energy price rises.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): Many of my constituents have written to me expressing the same concerns. Furthermore, the majority are members of single-parent families, particularly women, who have already borne the brunt of austerity and the worst effects of the changes in universal credit. They will not now benefit from the £20 uplift that the Government have removed from so many families who needed it. Does my right hon. Friend agree that more needs to be done to support those families?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I remind hon. Members who intervene to face forward so that you are addressing the House and are properly picked up by the microphones.

Stewart Hosie: My hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) is right that more must be done across the board. So far, women have particularly borne the brunt of the universal credit reduction, and people on modest incomes will bear the brunt of the national insurance increase. Of course, we must take more action across the board.

On the narrow point about the increase in standing charges, what possible reason can there be for energy standing charges doubling other than blatant price gouging and profiteering? The UK Government could act to stop this today if they had the will. This House was prepared to expedite sanctions on Russian oligarchs—in fact, we all said they should have happened already—and, given that we are facing the worst inflation since the 1970s, I am pretty confident this House would be prepared to expedite legislation to outlaw the daylight robbery of people through this obscene profiteering.

I am conscious of time, so I will not take much longer. I am struck by the stark public warnings about the rise in the cost of living. Martin Lewis has said that people were already at risk of “starving or freezing,” and the anti-poverty campaigner Jack Monroe has said that the cost of living crisis will have “fatal” consequences. The Government need to listen not to us or even to high-profile campaigners but to the millions out there who I fear will soon be cold and hungry, and take urgent and immediate steps before this crisis spirals out of control.

5.52 pm

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate on an incredibly important issue for many families in Blackpool. My constituency is among the most deprived in England, with the numbers of households in poverty, in receipt of benefits and looking for work being far higher than the national average. Indeed, eight of the 10 most deprived neighbourhoods in England are in Blackpool. Some commentators have said we are on the cusp of a cost of living crisis, but the sad reality is that many of my constituents have been struggling to manage their household budgets for a very long time.

Let us be clear that to frame this debate, as the socialists and Scottish nationalists have, as a “Tory cost of living crisis” is completely ridiculous and ignorant of the facts. The unavoidable truth is that the inflationary pressures created by economies emerging from the pandemic, the increases in wholesale gas prices and Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine have caused, and will continue to cause, a huge strain on household budgets for the immediate future, so we need to be honest with people about the causes of inflation and the fact that higher energy bills, food prices and prices at the pumps are not going away any time soon.

We also have to be honest with people that there is only so much that Governments can do to mitigate these higher costs. Governments cannot eliminate every single price rise in a free market, and we should not pretend otherwise. This Government are already providing a £20 billion package of support to help families with the huge increases in the cost of living. More families are in receipt of universal credit in Blackpool than anywhere else in this nation, and many of them will be benefiting from an effective £1,000 tax cut through our changes to the universal credit taper rate.

People in Blackpool will also disproportionately benefit from the significant rise in the national living wage to £9.50 per hour. Of course, those are not the only measures through which this Government are supporting families. The Chancellor has already announced the £350 package of household support for energy bills and council tax, which is worth some £9 billion, and we are providing more discretionary funding to local authorities to help those in need, as well as increasing the warm home discount to £150 and extending its eligibility. This Government have a good record in supporting families, but these are unprecedented times. We can do more and we must look to do more. Whether by looking to temporarily reduce fuel duty to protect motorists from the surge in prices or looking again at the national insurance increase, the upcoming Budget presents an opportunity to demonstrate that we understand the pressures that families are facing.

On energy, Governments of all colours, for decades, have failed to ensure a supply of affordable and domestically produced energy, and the successive failures are now coming home to roost. The drop of UK nuclear output to its lowest level since the 1980s is particularly concerning, and previous Governments, of both parties, have dithered on nuclear for far too long. I have some sympathy with the Opposition’s call to cut VAT on energy bills, and I have spoken about that on several occasions, but my understanding is that the cut would not apply to Northern Ireland, due to the Northern Ireland protocol, and of course the money to fund public services has to come from somewhere—I am afraid there are no easy options here. I also believe that there is a strong case to remove the cost of so-called “green levies” from energy bills, which could save households about £150 to £200 per year, on average. Many of my constituents would be shocked to find out that these levies cost them so much, and that some of the schemes they subsidise are not particularly green. However, once again, if they are taken away from bills, they will no doubt end up in the Exchequer’s lap and fall on general taxation, so we have to be careful what we wish for.

In the longer term, the Government must ensure that more nuclear power plants are brought online, and I welcome the new finance model for nuclear, which encourages a wider range of private investment into new nuclear projects. I also welcome the Government’s support for and investment in the small modular reactors currently being pioneered, which would reduce the cost of nuclear in the long term, letting it work alongside renewable sources.

Neil Parish: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his speech so far. Rolls-Royce can produce a lot of these smaller nuclear reactors, and we probably need to be able to boost Rolls-Royce to get those reactors out.

Scott Benton: I thank my hon. Friend and he makes a good point. I know that he shares my ambition for the Government to expand their capabilities on nuclear.

We also need to consider further investment in North sea oil and gas, in order to ensure a smooth transition to green and nuclear. Of course, these measures would not necessarily protect households against rising bills today, but they would provide security of supply in the longer term, reduce our dependency on foreign powers and help to reduce bills to consumers in the longer term.

In closing, it would be remiss of me not to point out that the state can only do so much. Work pays, and so getting people into employment so that they can provide for themselves and their family ultimately gives them the best opportunity. This Government have presided over a jobs miracle, and it is remarkable to think that there are more people in work now than before the pandemic, with the number of employees on payroll at a record high. However, again, there is more we can do. Blackpool has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country and there are more than 2,000 people out of work in my constituency alone. Yet there are hundreds of job vacancies locally, with employers telling me that they advertise for new posts and that time and time again people either do not apply for them or, on some occasions, turn up at an interview and seemingly go out of their way not to get the job. I know that the Department for Work and Pensions has taken steps to incentivise people into work, and that work needs to continue. If there are jobs out there, people need to take them.

5.59 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is interesting to follow the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton). It was nice to hear that he believes his Government are not doing well enough. We on the SNP Benches certainly agree with that, if not with everything in his speech.

Modelling carried out by the fuel poverty campaigners Energy Action Scotland on the impact of energy price rises in April suggests that 41% of households in West Dunbartonshire will be living in fuel poverty following the increases. Indeed, the front page of the *Lennox Herald* in my constituency has had the headline, “Families are turning down food because they can’t afford to cook”. This was a quote from the local food bank in Dumbarton, Food For Thought, which revealed that people in need are actually turning away meals because they cannot afford the energy required to heat them. At the beginning of the century, food banks were a rarity in our communities, but after years of the austerity-driven agenda from the Conservative Government that caused great hardship to vulnerable households while letting big business cronies and foreign owners off scot-free, they have become life rafts in a sea of inequality.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) alluded to the 1970s, which some of us are old enough to remember, as well as growing up in the 1980s. It is woeful in this day and age that anyone should consider that people now turn off their washing machines and wash their clothes and bedlinen in cold water, or would use a brush and a pail rather than a Hoover. It seems absolutely ridiculous. I remember a single-parent family who had to do the exact same thing. They were lucky that they had family who could help them with that impact of the aggressive politics of the British Conservative party. How my father, as a single parent of four kids—one of them profoundly disabled; he never made to adult life—got through it, I have no idea. But all is not lost for the Government. They need to take urgent, real action before the irreparable damage that was done in the ’80s is foisted yet again on households such as those in West Dunbartonshire—indeed, across the whole of the UK. Introducing immediate emergency cash payments would make a difference for

many households and save many from falling into hardship. It is the right thing to do from a moral point of view but also from an economical point of view.

While much attention is quite rightly focused on rising energy costs, there are other factors impacting on the cost of living that need to be addressed. Colleagues have alluded to them and will continue to do so, so I will raise just two factors and how they are affecting my own constituency caseload. My office has been inundated by families who, despite working, rely on universal credit to help make ends meet but who are now desperately calling for further help. The Government’s callous £1,040 cut for millions claiming UC in the middle of a cost of living crisis has had a devastating impact on these families, and the further price increases are leaving them vulnerable, scared and, indeed, impoverished. The Chancellor’s autumn Budget announcements barely tinkered around the edges and will not come close to compensating for the cuts to universal credit.

The UK has one of the lowest sick pay rates in the OECD. The current rate of £96.35 per week is wholly inadequate, and one in five workers is not eligible for it. The specific groups most likely at risk are women and those in insecure work. The UK Government must surely believe that increasing statutory sick pay in line with the real living wage, and removing the threshold and extending it to 52 weeks instead of 28, is long overdue given the traumas of so many during the pandemic.

If the Chancellor needs any pointers on how to tackle this issue, we need only cast our eyes to the Scottish Parliament and its Government, and the priorities that they are setting with the limited powers of devolution. In many areas where the Scottish Parliament has devolved powers, Scotland enjoys lower than average costs compared with those in England and Wales, be that average household water charges, council tax bills or rail fares. The Scottish Government are delivering their game-changing child payment, one of five family social security benefits, and unique in the UK. I say “social security” because it is not a hand-out: we pay for it; it is what socially progressive Governments do. That will double in value in April, impacting immediately on 110,000 children in Scotland. The Scottish Government are also committing more than £3.9 billion for social security expenditure in 2022-23, providing support to more than 1 million people; that is £360 million above the level of funding to be received from the UK Government. It will help low-income families with their living costs, including heating, and enable disabled people to live full and independent lives; it will pay for the new adult disability payment.

Those are just some of the actions taken by the Scottish Government, who care for the people they govern: a Government who are serious about tackling the inequalities that exist in our country—systemic inequalities founded in the traumas of the ’70s and ’80s—and who want to create a fair and better country for all.

The Scottish Government can only do so much at the moment with the limitations of devolution, but with the full powers of national self-determination delivering independence they can deviate from both the previous courses of British Governments and the present Government, who have never worked for the people of Scotland, as well as the people of England, Wales and indeed Northern Ireland.

[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

As I have said, serious times call for serious measures and I, like my constituents, have no faith that the UK Government are able to, or capable of, delivering them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. The wind-ups will start at 6.40 pm.

6.6 pm

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) said, these are unprecedented times and families are facing unprecedented cost of living pressures, but it is important that we set the scene. The covid-19 pandemic has created an immeasurable strain on global supply chains, leading to increasing inflation and rising prices of food and everyday household items. We have seen wholesale fuel and energy prices rise due to increased global demand for gas as economies around the world recover from the pandemic, and that has been compounded by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has pushed oil and gas prices up even further. We may only import 4% of our gas from Russia but, as the world's largest exporter of natural gas, Russia's actions have driven wholesale gas prices up worldwide. So a global pandemic on a scale not seen since the Spanish flu and an act of naked Russian aggression that is reminiscent of a bygone age equal unprecedented factors that have come together to create a perfect storm of pressure on families and households who are struggling with the cost of living.

We must be honest: the Government cannot control these global factors that have caused a strain on families and households, but they can shield people from the impact of some of these pressures, and they have done.

Getting more people into work is the single most important way the Government can support people with the rising cost of living. I recently hosted a business breakfast club in Stourbridge and was encouraged by how many firms are hiring and expanding, including by way of apprenticeships. However, filling these job vacancies and addressing skills shortages were raised as two major challenges for local businesses. That is why I am pleased that the Government's plan for jobs is geared to tackle those problems.

The £2.9 billion restart scheme and a new £200 million scheme to improve job search advice are helping unemployed people find work. There is also £2.3 billion in funding to double the number of work coaches to provide bespoke support for jobseekers. From speaking to work coaches at Stourbridge jobcentre in my constituency I know of the positive impact they can have, and in Stourbridge it is showing results, with a fall of nearly 30% in unemployment since this time last year, equating to nearly 50% for young people. That is a significant drop.

The lifetime skills guarantee is another important Government programme that will equip people with the skills they need to fill the record number of job vacancies. I know that this programme will be appreciated by local business leaders in Stourbridge. Ensuring that work pays and making sure that people earn decent wages are vital in supporting families and households with the rising cost of living, and we should not forget that the

historic vaccine programme and the plan for jobs have together helped deliver the fastest economic growth in the G7.

That is, however, not the only avenue of support this Government are providing. They are implementing a wide-ranging package of targeted and immediate support for households facing rising energy bills and fuel costs, from a £200 rebate on energy bills for all households to a £150 council tax rebate for over 86% of homes in the west midlands and a fuel duty freeze for the twelfth year in a row. The Government are stepping up to support working people.

That Government support will help to alleviate the shock of energy prices in the short term, but it is important that we ensure an affordable and secure energy supply for families and households in the long term. On the continent we see only too well the problems that dependence on fossil fuels and Russian oil and gas are causing for our European neighbours. It is imperative that we reduce our reliance on fossil fuels and transition to renewable energy sources. The Government have already made significant progress over the past decade and have increased the UK's renewable energy capacity by 500% since 2010. However, we must do more, which is why I am pleased that the Government have announced a plan to phase out British imports of Russian gas by the end of this year, along with £380 million to support the UK's world-leading offshore wind sector.

To transition away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy is the goal that we are and should be aiming for. Again, we should be honest: gas will remain a critical part of the UK's energy supply for the years to come. The transition away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy will not happen overnight. That is why it is important that we continue to support the North sea oil and gas industry and import from reliable countries such as Norway, to boost the supply of domestic gas and lower energy bills for hard-working families.

To conclude, I know that people face rising living costs—they face them in Stourbridge—but I also know that the Government are doing and will continue to do all they can to help alleviate the pressures for working families and households in my constituency.

6.11 pm

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb).

My constituents in Airdrie and Shotts are feeling the cost of living acutely and my inbox is full of their concerns. The reality is that the burden of poverty so often falls on children, with 24.8% of children in North Lanarkshire living in poverty, compared with the national average of 23%. Twenty-one per cent. of children live in households that experience both a low income and material deprivation. Those families are bearing the brunt of this Government's inaction.

This crisis will have other consequences. It is estimated that around 20,000 people across North Lanarkshire already use short-term, high-cost credit annually. Loan sharks and money lenders have already stepped up their operations throughout the four nations, with Trading Standards Scotland reporting an increase in illegal money lending as people try to deal with increasing energy costs, rising food prices and cuts to universal credit.

The Tories should be listening and taking action to support my Airdrie and Shotts constituents, because they are experiencing the squeeze imposed by the Government when, for example, they cut universal credit last year. We have already seen action from the SNP Scottish Government, who are choosing to expand fuel poverty schemes, but they continue to tackle the crisis with one hand tied behind their back by Westminster.

The matter of fuel costs has been raised throughout this debate. The cost of living crisis is taking place while energy markets are already stretched. It is now predicted that the Russia-Ukraine crisis threatens to exacerbate already-high energy prices and impact industry supply chains as well. Even before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, economists had predicted more hardship to come in April, when household energy prices and bills were set to soar.

It is really important to note that Money Saving Expert's Martin Lewis has warned against a deliberate attempt by UK Government Ministers to pin the UK's financial issues on the Ukraine war. He told BBC Radio 4:

"I'm slightly worried we are seeing what may be potentially a deliberate narrative shift that effectively says the entire cost of living crisis is due to Ukraine, and therefore we all need to make sacrifices, and that is not correct."

There is simply no excuse for inaction from the Chancellor. This crisis has been a decade in the making, with rising costs compounded by damaging decisions at Westminster—including Tory austerity cuts and Brexit—that have resulted in squeezed household incomes and rising poverty across the UK.

This UK Government must take urgent action and introduce an emergency financial package to support the most vulnerable. I have raised this matter previously in the Chamber because it affects so many of my Airdrie and Shotts constituents. Let us take, for example, the UK Government's buy now, pay later £200 loan. It is woefully inadequate and does nothing to help families. Even the Scottish Trades Union Congress has stated that this buy now, pay later loan

"comes nowhere near tackling the problem"

and that

"it is nothing short of shameful that people are being forced to choose between food and heat."

The SNP is calling for the loan to be turned into a grant, and for a more meaningful financial package to be introduced to protect household incomes in the face of Tory cuts and tax hikes. The cost of living squeeze is happening now and it will only get worse once the bills rise in April and when the Tory regressive national insurance tax hike takes effect.

The UK Government have consistently ignored our calls for an emergency budget to tackle the cost of living crisis. I will repeat something that I have already said in this Chamber in the hope that the Minister will listen, rather than play on his phone. To provide certainty and reassurance, the UK Government must immediately announce a comprehensive financial package to help struggling families. As a minimum, the SNP proposes the following measures: a £200 buy now, pay later loan that must be turned into a more generous grant; the regressive national insurance tax hike must be scrapped; cuts to universal credit must be reversed; the child payment must be matched UK-wide; and, really importantly,

wages must be increased, and there must be a real living wage. There can be no more delays from this Tory Government. The energy crisis is hitting the UK's most vulnerable right now, including my constituents in Airdrie and Shotts. It is the UK Government's duty to provide and deliver a substantial financial package.

6.17 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar), who is a good friend and comrade. When she talked about loan sharks, it reminded me of the misleading adverts that we see on social media from debt companies, which I do regard as loan sharks, as they force people into trust deeds and other such things. I know the Minister used to be in the Treasury, so he will be familiar with some of these arguments. Certainly this is a matter that I will be taking up with the Government in future, because it must be tackled. If we are in a cost of living crisis and people see these misleading adverts on Facebook and other social media outlets, their lives could be made even worse.

I am told that repetition is not a vice. I was in a Westminster Hall debate this afternoon on in-work poverty, which was led by the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris). It is worth reminding people that in-work poverty is at its highest ever level, disproportionately affecting lone parents, disabled people and carers. As the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has told us, 68% of working age adults in poverty are in a household where at least one adult is in work. Those are the highest figures ever recorded since 1996, when figures were first gathered on these issues.

I ask the Government to look specifically at in-work poverty. Far too many people in low-paid jobs do not have any opportunities to progress to better work and to better wages. Moreover, far too many of our fellow citizens are working in insecure jobs with unpredictable hours and unpredictable incomes.

I have a real concern about minimum wage rates, which some of my colleagues have also mentioned. A recent article on The Ferret website—the story was also covered by *The Herald* newspaper—outlined that an alarming number of the 10,000 jobs advertised on the Department for Work and Pensions website offered less than the national minimum wage. Burger King was advertising a post with a wage of £6 an hour; PizzaExpress, a wage of £6.56 an hour; and Farmfoods, a wage of £6.66 an hour. These companies made profits in the past couple of years—good profits, at that. I will be asking for an inquiry on why the DWP website is advertising jobs that pay less than the national minimum wage. It really is a scandal. Perhaps the DWP will refer itself to the national minimum wage compliance unit; it should, given that it is advertising jobs with these rates of pay. I hope that the Minister will respond to that point.

A number of Members on both sides of the Chamber have raised concerns about universal credit. Unfortunately, the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) is no longer in his place, but while he was speaking about universal credit, I looked at a parliamentary answer that I received from the Department for Work and Pensions, and it shows that 55% of Blackpool South constituents on universal credit have an average of £63 a month deducted

[Chris Stephens]

from their benefit. In Stourbridge, 39% of people receiving tax credits get an average of £61 deducted as a result of tax credit overpayment.

Deductions from benefits really have to stop. Universal credit is supposed to be a subsistence-level benefit; it is supposed to be the amount of money that people require to eat, heat their home, and live a good life. If we deduct from universal credit, it leads to the spiral of debt that many hon. Members have spoken about.

The Government need to do a couple of things. This scandal of advances has to stop; there really should be an up-front grant. The all-party Select Committee on Work and Pensions unanimously agreed that there should be a starter payment two weeks after a claim. That is perfectly reasonable. It would stop the cycle of advances and debts.

Also, why are the Government pursuing tax credit debts that are over six years old? If the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) wanted to sue me in the Scottish courts for a debt that was over six years old, the sheriff would immediately knock the case out, because it would be absurd; likewise if I were to sue the hon. Gentleman. So why are the Government pursuing tax credit overpayments that are decades old? It seems complete nonsense. I hope that the Government will sort that out.

The Minister is from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy; one thing that he and his Department can do to sort out in-work poverty is introduce an employment Bill that ends insecure work, for example by seeking to eliminate zero-hours contracts, and that stops nonsensical practices. For example, employers are texting four individuals and telling them, "The first person who arrives gets the shift." Employees then have to pay for transport to get to work, but they might not get the shift because someone else arrived two minutes before them. I hope that there will be an employment Bill, because we have been promised one since 2017. Five years on, it is still not here. Where is this mystical employment Bill? If the Government do not introduce it, perhaps they should support many of us who have brought forward employment legislation to address the plight of workers.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I was a bit reluctant to interrupt my hon. Friend, because he is making a fantastic speech, but may I give him an example that shows where the Government's priorities lie? One group of employees who are traditionally low paid and in very insecure work are catering and cleaning staff. Does he recall that in the last Budget, the Chancellor claimed to have no choice but to impose a tax hike on people who are paid low wages to clean floors and dishes in casinos, but was at the same time able to announce a tax pay-back for the lucky people who own casinos? Is that not an example of where this Government's true loyalties lie?

Chris Stephens: That is exactly where the Government's priorities lie. Let us not forget that in-work poverty disproportionately affects carers as well, and that has to change.

I am conscious of time, but I hope the Government will respond positively to the points I have made. This is their crisis—the things I am pointing out are not to do

with Ukraine or anything else. These things have been going on for 12 years, and the Government can immediately solve them.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): There are 15 minutes left and three of you want to speak. Doing the maths, it is five minutes each and then you can all have equal time.

6.25 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Many of the issues around the cost of living that we have heard about in the debate are underpinned by food security, which is what I will focus on. Before I expand on that, however, I reiterate that the people of Ukraine are at the forefront of our thoughts and discussions at this time. Their lives have been devastated by the horrors of war and they must remain uppermost in our minds as we reflect on any potential impact of the conflict on daily life here.

Hon. Members have previously touched on the anticipated consequences of the war on the global economy, including on food prices. Russia and Ukraine are the world's largest and fifth largest wheat exporters respectively, and the two countries are major suppliers of critical fertiliser components. We must realise that the consequences of that hit to the supply chain are likely to be felt severely in sub-Saharan Africa and places already struggling with hunger such as Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen. We must be ready to help those regions of the world most affected by a potential global food emergency.

Those global shortages will lead to rising food prices in the UK too. The EU is moving quickly on measures to support farming and businesses, and there is concern in agriculture that the UK will not replicate or work in parallel with that. Of course, millions of households across the UK were already seeing their food bills escalate long before the crisis in Ukraine. Shop price inflation leapt between January and February this year to the highest inflation rate recorded since November 2011.

The Resolution Foundation has warned that rising food and energy prices could cause a "second peak" in inflation of above 8% in the autumn. It is our most vulnerable constituents who will be hardest hit, experiencing an inflation rate of as much as 10% due to their spending a higher proportion of their household budget on food and fuel.

The agricultural industry forecasts difficult conditions in the global fertiliser market, where the UK is a much smaller player with less leverage after Brexit. If, as looks almost certain, the resultant higher costs mean that yields are reduced, that too will have an impact on food security and take a further toll on the cost of living. Farmers are facing a perfect storm, with prices for fertiliser, fuel, energy and feed rocketing. The sector in Scotland has raised the alarm about the far-reaching implications for markets, processors and abattoirs, and ultimately rising prices in supermarkets for consumers. A post-Brexit shortage of both permanent and seasonal workers, combined with a lack of haulage drivers and processing staff, has put serious strain on agriculture and food and drink businesses across Scotland. Meanwhile, the UK Government have reneged on promises to replace fully our former EU funding.

On top of all that, the Scottish and UK farming sector is being exposed to real, lasting harm by the UK Government's hurried and poorly conceived trade deals. The Department for International Trade's own analysis of the deal with New Zealand euphemistically described an expected loss of £150 million to fishing, agriculture and food-related sectors as just a "process of economic adjustment". Organisations such as the National Farmers Union of Scotland have consistently warned about food security issues in relation to that—indeed, it issued a press release on that very subject today—but have been repeatedly ignored or dismissed by the UK Government.

At Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions last week, the Secretary of State and the Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food claimed that the UK is largely self-sufficient in its food production. However, the Government's own analysis of food security shows that, by economic value, the UK produces only about 60% of food consumed domestically, and actual consumption of UK-produced food is closer to 54%, as a part of it is exported. In terms of historical, long-term trends, there is a concerning drop in the domestic supply ratio of fresh vegetables, from 76% in 1990 to 54% in 2020.

We need to ramp up domestic food production, but the planting window to do that is narrowing. The UK can do more to service the domestic market in cereals and spring barley, for example, but there is a risk of missing out if the EU acts faster and much of that services Europe instead. If offers come in from France or Germany to service spring cropping, businesses will take them.

We must keep things in perspective and do everything possible to assist with the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, where there are reports of farmers being unable to go out into their fields for fear of bombardment, but the UK Government clearly need to take food security here much more seriously and take action now to address the immediate risks to domestic food production. We remain vulnerable if we are too reliant on imports, and it is people on the lowest incomes who will suffer the most.

Some of the people I am angriest with are the Brexiteers. The snake oil salespeople blithely assured all of us who warned them about the problems of over-dependence on imported foods—we said this Government were making it impossible for many farmers and others in our food industries—that all would be well in the golden land of Brexitania. They are now truly reaping what they have sown, are they not? The trouble is that all the other countries around the world who have also been relying on Ukraine—that golden breadbasket of the world—and Russia to supply their needs are out there alongside us, hunting on the trade markets for deals on the rice, wheat, maize, nuts, fruits and oils that we have all been receiving up to now. When goods are in short supply, prices go up. We must recognise and face with clear eyes the food security problems that there will be for the most vulnerable among us on these isles.

6.31 pm

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock). While we cannot completely swerve the growing crisis around the globe, a sensible emergency package of financial measures could soften the blow, and it is incumbent on the Government to take decisive action now.

I speak on behalf of the people of Midlothian who, like the rest of the UK, are about to face the worst income squeeze for a generation. As a former coalmining community, my constituency unfortunately has first-hand experience of Tory Government policies leaving people high and dry and struggling with hardship. We are a resilient bunch though. It should not be too much to expect a little support from the Government rather than their hindering our efforts to tackle poverty and build back opportunities after the pandemic, but there is little evidence of that from this Administration.

It does not help the economy to take more money out of people's pockets and risk more people entering a spiral of debt and despair. Let us not soft soap this. As anti-poverty campaigner Jack Monroe warned the Work and Pensions Committee, this crisis will have fatal consequences for some families. It is not an exaggeration to say that more people will be forced to skip meals and face ill health, hunger and cold. This is 21st-century Britain; inequality is on the rise. Yes, there are global issues—I have not heard anyone try to deny that today—but they have simply compounded the crisis that we were already facing after years of Tory austerity. The ideology imposed by the Government, which we have had to endure, has left public services running on empty. We have seen drastic cuts to benefits, which hurt the most vulnerable, along with the refusal to protect pay and conditions to make sure workers earn enough to get by, the betrayal of pensioners, the absolute wrecking ball of Brexit and the half-hearted commitment to green energy investment.

As things stand, poor decisions and self-inflicted damage over a decade have left the UK without the resilience to cope when external factors such as covid or the war in Ukraine take their toll. We have had a poverty problem in the UK for years, yet more and more families on modest earnings are finding that they are being pushed into poverty. The New Economics Foundation warned that by April, half of children will be in families who cannot afford the cost of living. It should be a matter of shame for this Government that food banks have become an accepted thing in our towns. I pay huge tribute to the Trussell Trust and Midlothian Foodbank, Food Facts Friends in Penicuik and all the volunteers involved with them, but they should not be necessary. We need Government action, and we need to reduce the size of the storm that households are about to face.

The £200 loan announcement from the Chancellor is put into perspective by what is actually needed. We do not need loans that people have to pay back. The SNP has suggested a range of measures, but the Government simply will not listen. My constituency of Midlothian is not only poorly served by this Tory Government but has a cloth-eared Labour administration in the council that simply does not listen to the communities that it is there to represent. It is sluggish and poor to listen and drags its heels on bringing forward proposals from the Scottish Government that are designed to help ease the financial burden on households. Only a few weeks ago, the Labour administration proposed a whopping 4.7% increase in council tax, backed by some of their Tory chums. Thankfully, the SNP's alternative proposal to the budget was accepted, yet the council administration continues to implement what is now an SNP budget. Hon. Members can make of that what they will. It is time for action to be taken and we need it now.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): To resume his seat no later than 6.40 pm, I call Ben Lake.

6.35 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Mr Deputy Speaker. I shall endeavour to ensure that I am seated again in just under five minutes.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson). In the interests of time, I will say that I agree with every point that he made. Indeed, many points have been made this afternoon with which I would like to associate myself. We have heard a lot about the various pressures that are combining to fuel the cost of living crisis and those points have been well made.

We have heard about the rising cost of heating homes. I very much associate myself with the comments of the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), who drew attention to the fact that for many people in rural areas, the cost of heating their home has been further exacerbated by many premises being off-grid. With the price of heating oil and liquid gas rising, I have heard accounts from constituents whose heating costs have trebled in the few months since September last year. That is a pressing issue that is hitting rural areas.

Another driving force of the crisis in rural areas is the rising cost of fuel at the pump. Unfortunately, Wales has the highest car dependency in the UK with nearly 80% of commutes done by private car. Nearly half our businesses are located in rural areas where, sadly, people would be lucky to have multiple bus services a day. Of course I wholeheartedly support the rapid decarbonisation of our transport system to meet our net zero commitments, but many of my communities are devoid of the public transport infrastructure that would make that a reality. Sadly, they depend on private car use for essential journeys, whether going to work or going shopping.

With the RAC calculating that, on current rates, the Treasury will take an additional £2.9 billion from fuel prices, my party is calling on the Chancellor to urgently implement two measures. First, he should reform the rural fuel duty relief to extend it to more rural areas in Wales and improve its eligibility criteria to account for local transport provision. That would bring immediate relief at the pump for rural areas and would target areas with below UK average investment in public transport infrastructure, which would hopefully incentivise the longer-term solution that is represented by better public transport links.

Secondly, I urge the Chancellor to support the Road Haulage Association's call for an essential user category to be developed to reduce petrol prices for key services, such as logistics, and essential professions with high mileage, such as carers. Indeed, I have been told by constituents who are carers and who typically travel upwards of 50 miles a day that they are recompensed by only 30p a mile. At current fuel prices, that is simply unsustainable.

I draw attention to the impact that the rise in national insurance contributions will have on families, a point that has been well made today, and on businesses. It is effectively a tax on employment, which is why Plaid Cymru supports the proposal to increase the employment allowance from £4,000 to £5,000 a year, as advocated by the Federation of Small Businesses.

An expanded relief to allow eligible employers to reduce their national insurance liabilities would achieve several key objectives. First, it would make widespread and welcome pay rises more financially sustainable for businesses. Secondly, it would reduce the risk of higher costs being passed on as higher prices to consumers. Thirdly, it would help to protect businesses' ability to invest, which would boost our economy's productivity and economic growth at such a crucial time.

In sum—with time to spare, Mr Deputy Speaker—I urge the Chancellor to make use of the slightly improved picture of public finances and take the opportunity next week to introduce measures to help families and businesses and to avoid the energy crisis turning into a shock that stalls the economy.

6.39 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The message from both Opposition day debates is clear: when times are tough for ordinary people, the Conservative party drags its heels, erects barriers and rolls out excuses for being unable to help. It feels like the UK Government are devoid of a plan about this issue and are resorting to piecemeal measures that do not address the actual problem but give the appearance of action. Unfortunately, many of their actions actually make the situation worse.

The cost of living crisis has not just happened. It is not only a result of war in Ukraine but a foreseen consequence of the UK Government's policy failure, as my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) has just set out. That includes Brexit, as we have heard, which Scotland did not vote for—that is further compounding the cost of living crisis, leaving households and businesses all the more vulnerable.

Bodies such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have warned that the UK Government should not withdraw pandemic support in the face of rising and sustained inflation. The UK Government's failure to heed this kind of warning has contributed to the crisis that households across the UK face today. Indeed, a recent YouGov poll shows that 84% of Scots said they were worried about the Tory cost of living crisis and 43% said they were very worried, and no wonder.

Family budgets are under pressure from all sides, with real terms cuts in wages, the £1,040 a year cut to universal credit and significant rises in the cost of basic foodstuffs and energy that will hit low-income households hardest. People are deeply concerned about how on earth they are going to manage; they are not managing right now, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) described. Next month the Chancellor plans to raise national insurance, which will hit low and middle-income households hardest.

The effect of the Tory Government's policies is that many families are already unable to buy the essentials, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) eloquently explained. According to the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, when the increase in NI takes effect as many as 1 million UK households could be facing destitution and the spectre of spiralling debt, just as interest rates are on the rise.

As Victoria Benson, the chief executive of Gingerbread, has put it, budgets have already been cut back as much as possible, so the stark reality is that there is nowhere

else to go other than into debt or poverty. The Chancellor needs to do something to put money into the pockets of low and middle-income households as quickly as possible, to help them address the inflation that has already taken place and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) indicated, the worst that is yet to come.

Universal credit is a driver of poverty, including among working people, although the UK Government seem to forget that all too often. The withdrawal of the £20 a week uplift hits people very hard. Many households on universal credit are already worse off than they were in 2019 and many now fear for the future. The uplift must be reinstated. The UK Government should also reconsider their position on uprating given the forecast inflation rate in 2022 of 6%; the Scottish Government have just announced that they will increase six Scottish social security benefits by 6% from 1 April, helping low-income households and carers in light of the Tory cost of living crisis. That is the kind of swift and decisive action that matters so much now.

With energy bills for millions rising by £693 from April, Energy UK warning of further rises by October, which will make people significantly worse off, and concerns about the impact of the war in Ukraine on energy prices, this issue needs to be looked at very seriously. The way to do that is not, as the Chancellor has suggested, through a kiddy-on loan of £200; that is not an adequate response and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) pointed out, that is being forced on people.

As the Scottish Trades Union Congress says, this “buy now, pay later” loan comes nowhere near tackling the problem. As the SNP points out, it must be converted to a grant as part of a proper support package. The Chancellor must listen to the widespread calls to scrap VAT on energy bills and fuel, and consider a fuel duty regulator to feed back to consumers the additional income he receives through price increases.

We have heard that Jack Monroe has very sensibly highlighted the real effect of the cut in income for the poorest households and, focusing attention on the inflation premium facing low-income families with children, concludes that the impact of the cost of living crisis will be “fatal” in some cases. That must be a wake-up call for the Chancellor and the UK Government.

Maternity Action has highlighted concerns, pointing out the challenges facing new parents as the basic rate of statutory maternity, paternity and parental pay has fallen behind wages. From April, the basic rate of these vital payments will be just 47% of the already inadequate national living wage. So it is even more pressing that the UK Government should join the Scottish Government in backing a real living wage, including for younger workers. Someone’s age should not determine how much they are paid. The UK Government should also reverse the decline in support for expectant and new parents and, as we have heard, reform statutory sick pay.

Pensioners face a grim future after the Chancellor’s triple lock betrayal, reneging on clear commitments in his party’s manifesto. UK pensioners already get the lowest state pension in north-west Europe and now will be among the hardest hit by the cost of living crisis, losing £520 this year and £2,500-plus over the next five years, just as they face massive increases in energy and other costs. I spoke to a constituent in Neilston on

Saturday, who wanted to know why she was being abandoned on the cost of living by the UK Government. She is a WASPI woman, and let me say yet again that it is high time the UK Government settled the claim by WASPI women.

As the SNP Scottish Government are demonstrating, with the limited levers at their disposal, it does not have to be this way. With the full powers of independence, we could do so much more with Scotland’s resources. Already, the Scottish Government are using their limited powers to support low-income households and to mitigate the Tory cost of living crisis. Nearly £70 million is going in direct financial support to households through the pandemic support payment, and discretionary housing payments of over £80 million are protecting more than 70,000 households, most of it going to mitigate the UK bedroom tax.

My hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar) mentioned the £20 million fuel insecurity fund, helping households at risk of self-disconnection. There is a £290 million cost of living support package, which supports council tax reduction. Spending on devolved benefits will already be about £4 billion in 2022-23, which is 10% above the funding from the UK block grant. The Scottish child payment will double in April, immediately helping 110,000 children. The Child Poverty Action Group estimates that, once that is doubled and the planned expansion of free school meals is in place, the net cost of bringing up a child in Scotland will be nearly £24,000 lower for low-income families than elsewhere in the UK.

Rolling out similar child-friendly policies across the UK would make a real difference, because a decade of Tory mismanagement has led the UK into this cost of living crisis. I am very keen to hear from the Minister about the missing employment Bill, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) highlighted, could also deliver real change.

The Chancellor has an opportunity in his Budget to begin to fix this. He could start by applying a broad-based windfall tax on excess profits of major companies, so that major organisations such as Amazon and other large retailers, as well as energy companies, can help to relieve the burden that millions of households face. He could also scrap the £4 billion tax giveaway to the banks. Above all, he needs to stop making excuses, stop ignoring the realities of people’s day-to-day lives and what the Tory cost of living crisis is doing, and start delivering to make a difference where it is needed. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Dundee East said, the UK Government must take urgent and immediate steps before this crisis spirals out of control.

6.48 pm

The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands): I thank right hon. and hon. Members for taking part in this important debate. This Government recognise and understand the pressures people are facing with the cost of living. This is of course a deeply worrying time for many of our constituents, and we will continue to listen to people’s concerns, as we have done throughout the pandemic.

Wholesale energy prices have been rising due to global pressures. Let me add here the Government’s condemnation of Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, with its inevitable

[*Greg Hands*]

impact on global energy prices, and the UK is not alone in feeling the pinch. However, I reiterate that energy security remains an absolute priority for the Government. We are confident that our security will be maintained as we transition to net zero. Indeed, many of the measures in going to net zero will help our energy security by reducing dependency on imported fossil fuels.

We continue to work closely with key industry organisations including Ofgem and National Grid Gas to monitor both supply and demand. As well as ensuring security of supply, we are also working to ensure that consumers get a fair deal.

Let me turn to points raised in the debate, first by Back-Bench Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), in a sound speech, called for more nuclear power and reminded us of Labour's failures in the past. In 1997, the Labour party manifesto said

"We see no economic case for...nuclear power stations."

Secondly, he rightly spoke against hydrocarbon imports from Russia. Thirdly, he spoke about heating oil—as we heard, heating oil prices are a concern on both sides of the House at the moment—and raised a few points about whether the prices charged can be justified. A recent Competition and Markets Authority investigation did not show any sign of profiteering, but, if he has evidence of unfair or sharp practices, he should please let me or others in the Department or the Treasury know.

The right hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) had done his homework. He spoke of the impacts of bills and other changes. However, he also needs to consider other aspects of Government action, such as the 12-year freeze in retail fuel prices and the increase in the national living wage from £8.91 to £9.50, which will put an extra £1,000 a year into the pockets of someone on that.

Peter Grant: Will the Minister give way?

Greg Hands: I will respond first to the debate. If I have time, I will take interventions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) said that there were more universal credit recipients in his constituency than in any other in the UK—a startling fact for his constituency—and said how much his constituents are benefiting from the changes in the UC taper rate as well as the increases in the national living wage, which he supported. On green levies, we announced in the heat and building strategy an affordability call for evidence on where to put those levies. We will take decisions on that later this year. His support for nuclear was well made, particularly coming from his part of the world near Springfields.

The hon. Members for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar) and for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) gave a selective account of Scottish Government actions. But Scotland is benefiting hugely from the broad shoulders of the United Kingdom and the UK taxpayer in particular. What would really hammer his constituents is separation and the immediate huge budget deficit, which would be easily the largest in the western world. Either taxes would have to rise or Scottish public services would be cut.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb) praised the £9.1 billion package to help those with increased energy bills and spoke about how to

reduce our dependence as well as the importance of the transition to renewables. That is the answer. She also praised the Government for the 500% increase in the proportion of our electricity that comes from renewables since 2010.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) made some important points about in-work poverty, but the best route out of poverty is work itself. I heard no mention from him of yesterday's amazing figures, with the number of unemployed falling below pre-pandemic levels for the first time and another strong increase in employees on the payroll in February.

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister give way?

Greg Hands: I will answer the hon. Member's point about minimum wage job adverts. The Department for Work and Pensions does have checks and, if it discovers any positions below the minimum wage, it will take them down.

Chris Stephens: I thank the Minister for that helpful answer. Is it in order for us to report the Department for Work and Pensions to the national minimum wage compliance unit?

Greg Hands: We take enforcement of the national minimum wage incredibly seriously across Government—all Departments do. However, I point out that the increase in the national living wage from £8.91 to £9.50, which is coming in just a few weeks, will help out someone working full-time by £1,000 a year. That will make a huge difference to their pay packets.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) rightly condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine—I praise her for that—and made some important points on food security that I am sure will be drawn to the attention of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) called for a package of measures to tackle the crisis. Well, I had to go back to the SNP motion, because we will remember a package of measures being announced by our Chancellor of the Exchequer on 3 February at this Dispatch Box precisely to take action on energy bills. The hon. Gentleman is calling for a package of measures. Unfortunately, his motion calls "to scrap the energy bill rebate scheme".

His own motion calls for that very package of measures to be scrapped.

Moving on to the Front-Bench contributions, I have been in this House 17 years but I do not think I have ever heard a Member of Parliament for Aberdeen—for Aberdeen itself—without a single word of support for the North sea oil and gas sector. The hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) was ducking the issue, rightly raised by the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), about what exactly is meant by the windfall tax. There are 100,000 Scottish jobs at stake, many in his constituency—in fact, his constituency may have more of those jobs than any other constituency in Britain—yet there was not a single word of support for those hard-working people in the North sea oil and gas sector.

The First Minister of Scotland said—these are her own words—

"production from the North Sea in the short term is not a practicably deliverable solution."

That is totally defeatist. We will do further licensing rounds and we will do one this year. We are now seeing the benefits of previous licensing rounds. Only today IOG announced the Elgood field coming online, the second new field this week. This is great news for the UK as a whole and for the overall North sea sector so crucial for Scotland's success, as well as the success of the whole of the United Kingdom.

They are not the Scottish national party. They are against the interests of Scotland. They are the Scottish dependency party, dependent on imported hydrocarbons from abroad, including from Russia. I read carefully the hon. Gentleman's motion—one should always read the motion, as we all well know—which calls to “scrap the energy bill rebate scheme”.

That would mean no reduction of £200 in energy bills in October, no council tax reduction in two weeks' time, and, presumably, a repayment of the £290 million Barnett consequential. What public services would the hon. Member for Aberdeen South cut in Scotland to fund that £290 million repayment?

Finally, I turn to Labour's windfall tax. I must say that I had a slightly different interpretation of the position of SNP Front-Benchers. I think the hon. Member for Aberdeen South was supporting the windfall tax. I agree that it was not really clear, but I took it as supporting given that the motion talks about the windfall tax and this is a debate on energy. But I have to say to Labour that 82% of oil and gas produced in the UK is produced in Scotland, which means that Labour's windfall tax would very largely hit the Scottish economy. A windfall tax could accelerate rising prices.

Labour has given up on Aberdeen and north-east Scotland. I remember when Labour had both seats for Aberdeen. Now, they are nowhere near—nowhere near. The Scottish Conservatives have overtaken them and anyone opposing the SNP in Aberdeen should vote for Ryan Houghton and his team in May. With moves like the windfall tax, is it any wonder that Labour support in Aberdeen is in decline and going nowhere? Maybe the hon. Member for Edinburgh South should go back to the shadow Cabinet and stick up for Scotland, and not throw in Labour's lot with the Scottish National party—or the Scottish dependency party—when it comes to oil and gas.

As the Exchequer Secretary and I have set out, the Government have listened to, recognised and acted on the concerns of families who are struggling with the cost of living. We do not take their concerns lightly. The energy bills support scheme will provide £5.6 billion of support to households later this year, ahead of the winter period, while the additional support for English homes in council tax bands A to D will further help households with the cost of living—totalling, with Barnett consequentials, a package worth £9.1 billion. The Government will continue to engage with industry, consumer groups and other stakeholders as we progress these measures.

It is this Government who have the clear plan. The Opposition parties have squabbled among themselves today, arguing over the definitions of windfall tax, but it is we who are delivering energy security and energy transition, and securing this nation's prosperity.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House warns that households will soon be suffering the worst income squeeze since the 1970s; notes The Institute for Fiscal Studies analysis that households are on course to be £800 worse off; calls on the Government to scrap VAT on energy bills, implement a windfall tax on companies which are benefitting from significantly increased profits as a result of impacts associated with the covid-19 pandemic or the current international situation, and to scrap the energy bill rebate scheme and introduce immediate emergency cash payments for households.

HOUSE OF COMMONS MEMBERS' FUND

Ordered,

That Stuart Andrew be removed as a Trustee of the House of Commons Members' Fund and Christopher Pincher be appointed as a Trustee in pursuance of section 2 of the House of Commons Members' Fund Act 2016.—(*Gareth Johnson.*)

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 4 to 7 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

AGRICULTURE

That the draft Agriculture (Financial Assistance) (Amendment) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 1 February, be approved.

That the draft Direct Payments to Farmers (Reductions) (England) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 3 February, be approved.

That the draft Agriculture (Lump Sum Payment) (England) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 10 February, be approved.

MEDICAL DEVICES

That the draft Commissioner for Patient Safety (Appointment and Operation) (England) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 7 February, be approved.—(*Gareth Johnson.*)

Question agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Wera Hobhouse to present her petition.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I said no to the statutory instrument motion, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Which one?

Wera Hobhouse: The second.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I did say “With the leave of the House,” but am I able to take the second motion again? [*Interruption.*] No, it has already passed. I am sorry; you should have shouted more loudly, Wera. You could have come up and told me, and that would have been a lot clearer. I gave the opportunity.

PETITION

Periodontal Disease and Diabetes

7.1 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I rise to present a petition that has been prepared by my constituent, Dr Christopher Turner. The petition highlights a relationship between diabetes and periodontal disease of which too few doctors are aware. It has been signed by more than 100 people across Bath.

The petition states that the petitioners

“request that the House of Commons urge the Government...to add questions about dental care to the five diabetic risks already checked annually by doctors and to require doctors to record the names of patients’ dentists in their notes and give them annual HbA1c results and for dentists to send an annual summary of the Basic Periodontal Examination with an explanation of the scores to patients’ doctors.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Notes that there is overwhelming scientific evidence from multiple countries that diabetes mellitus and periodontal disease are linked, the one affecting the other in a two-way process and that diabetics are at a 3-4 times greater risk of developing periodontal disease than non-diabetics and that diabetics who smoke are at even greater risk; further that periodontal disease has been described at the sixth complication of diabetes yet few doctors are aware of the relationship, although it is well-known to dentists since it was first described in 1928; further that when periodontal disease is brought under control, metabolic control is improved and this can lead to a reduced need for diabetic medication; further that doctors are not asking patients about their dental health when they carry out reviews because this question is missing from the National Institute of Clinical Excellence check list that they follow; further that NCIE has previously refused to add a question about dental care to the above list such that doctors are not advising diabetics who do not have regular dental care that this is in their interests; declares that diabetic patients may be disadvantaged because of this omission; further that as a routine doctors and dentists are not working together for this growing group of patients and not sharing results when it is known that a blood HbA1c level of greater than 6.5 is associated with greater periodontal breakdown; and further that dentists are not routinely sharing their Basic Periodontal Examination results with doctors such that trends in the management of both diseases are not being observed.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government, and in particular the Department for Health and Social Care to add questions about dental care to the five diabetic risks already checked annually by doctors and to require doctors to record the names of patients’ dentists in their notes and give them annual HbA1c results and for dentists to send an annual summary of the Basic Periodontal Examination with an explanation of the scores to patients’ doctors.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002717]

Bank Branch Closures

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Gareth Johnson.)

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Ms Anum Qaisar.

7.2 pm

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am aware that it is not necessarily a requirement to thank the Chair in an Adjournment debate, but this is my very first Adjournment debate and it really is a pleasure to serve under your chairship.

The subject that I am raising today is so important and so topical: just today, HSBC has announced that it is closing 69 stores across the four nations. My constituency of Airdrie and Shotts is centrally located; in fact, the wee town of Harthill is pretty much halfway between Glasgow and Edinburgh. There is therefore an assumption that my constituents can travel around easily, so if a local service such as a bank closes, they can simply hop on a bus. That is not the case.

In September last year, Virgin Money announced that it was closing three of its Lanarkshire stores: Airdrie, Cumbernauld and East Kilbride. The Airdrie store closed its doors in January this year. My constituents were told that they could travel from Airdrie town centre to the nearest branch in Baillieston. That is either 20 minutes by car or a bus journey of an hour, and for that to work, we would have to assume that people do not live in places such as Greengairs, Petersburn or Chapelhall. Essentially, my constituents who do not live in Airdrie town centre have considerable journeys to make. That poses additional barriers to those who are either financially vulnerable or struggling with mobility.

When I spoke last year to officials from Virgin Money, which is the rebranded former Clydesdale branch, they told me that the closures were in response to changing customer demand and a reduction in footfall. That did not really make sense to me, because every single bank branch in the country saw a change in customer demand and a reduction in footfall. Why? Because we were in the midst of a global pandemic and in lockdown.

When we think of banking hubs, we also think of London, the big city. However, my constituency has a proud 181-year history as a banking hub, and Airdrie Savings Bank, founded in 1835, had its own long and proud history in north Lanarkshire and, indeed, throughout Scotland. It was a small commercial bank which operated on mutual principles and had no shareholders, being governed instead by a board of trustees.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. We have discussed banks here on many occasions. These closures affect the most vulnerable in society, the elderly and others who have no access to modern technology. They cannot simply jump online to do their banking. The banks make massive profits every year, and they have an obligation to look after the customers who have, in fact, built them up.

Ms Qaisar: Those are important matters, and I will come to them later in my speech.

I vividly remember being dragged to the high street when I was a wee girl growing up in Motherwell. Adult Anum does not necessarily have to be dragged to the high street, but as a child I hated it. My mum had her routine: she would go to Asda and get her messages, and then she would pop into Airdrie Savings Bank. Popping into the bank meant that she could get all her banking issues sorted out, but bank branch staff tend to become known to locals, so Mum would often stand and have a wee blether with them. However, this small commercial bank ceased trading entirely and closed its doors in 2017. Royal Bank of Scotland in Graham Street closed its doors in 2018, and Barclays shut six years ago. As of today, Airdrie is serviced by only one bank, Bank of Scotland, and one building society, Nationwide. It is the same story in Shotts. In 2016 Royal Bank of Scotland shut down, and Airdrie Savings Bank closed its Shotts branch back in 2015. RBS does send a van to the Co-op car park once a week for an hour, but outwith those times people have to head for a nearby town such as Wishaw.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree that this is a national issue? We have experienced exactly the same problems in Reading and Woodley. Again, it is elderly and disabled people who are put under enormous pressure by these closures. It is really hard for them. Many are only familiar with banking through cheques, and they want to see a person: they do not want to have to deal with “online”, and, indeed, their families often worry about their using online banking. Perhaps the hon. Lady will join me in calling for wider national consideration of this issue, and, in particular, for the Government to put pressure on the banks to provide hubs.

Ms Qaisar: I entirely agree. When banks decide to close, we as Members of Parliament rightly engage in meaningful discussions. We fight for our constituents and try our level best to ensure that they have access to the local branch for as long as possible. If a branch does close we will fight for those banking services, but the reality of these commercial decisions is that all too often such discussions do not end in a positive outcome for our constituents. I say to the Minister that, with only a handful of banks on our high streets, now is the time for Government intervention. The banking issues that my constituents are facing will affect people in all four nations. I would welcome the Minister’s comments on what work she plans to do to ensure that our high streets do not become banking ghost towns.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): My hon. Friend said that there was “meaningful” engagement between MPs and the banks. It may be meaningful on one side—indeed, I know that it is—but it certainly does not appear to be meaningful on the other. The lack of proper consultation between the banks, the communities and their representatives is particularly unhelpful at a time when the banks are abandoning so many of our high streets.

Ms Qaisar: I completely agree with my hon. Friend.

In 2018, a Scottish parliamentary inquiry into the impact of bank branch closures on local businesses, consumers and the Scottish economy highlighted a number of concerns. It stuck out to me that Pete Cheema of the Scottish Grocers Federation said:

“We need to go back and talk to the banks. It is very clear that the decisions are being made in London. Up and down the UK, 600 branches have closed, but part of Wales, the whole of Scotland

and bits of the south-west of England have suffered the most. We need to take that in context; I wonder sometimes whether the banks understand Scotland’s landscape.”

Evidence from Which? indicated

“there are 130 ‘cash deserts’ in Scotland (places where there is no access to either a branch or an ATM within a reasonable distance).”

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Ms Qaisar: I will make some progress.

Banks are so much more than simply a place to deal with money. Age Scotland has argued:

“For many older people, going to the bank...gets them out of the house... This is an important component in addressing the...effects of loneliness”.

The stark reality is that bank branch closures deny vulnerable communities their right to independent living.

Face-to-face banking must not be lost. Will the Minister clarify what work she is doing to ensure the social inclusion aspect of banking is not lost for those who need it? Bank branch closures affect around 20% of small businesses with a turnover below £2 million, as they often use branches as their primary means of banking.

I remember working part time in retail as a university student and having to jump over to the bank with the takings of the day or to ensure we had enough petty cash in the register. Such access to banking and cash is vital, especially if we want to ensure that small businesses continue to hold a place on our high streets.

Kirsten Oswald: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Ms Qaisar: I will make some progress, if my hon. Friend does not mind. [*Interruption.*] I am trying to be polite, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The concerns I have outlined also apply to charities and trusts, which often heavily rely on cash donations and payments. There is a security risk to volunteers, causing additional pressure, if they have to travel a distance to an alternative branch.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate.

I am lucky that my constituency has the Cambuslang bank hub, which was part of a pilot scheme involving the Post Office and the high street banks to ensure locals have access to face-to-face banking services. Does my hon. Friend agree it is important that, where there are widespread closures, there is something to replace those services for the community?

Ms Qaisar: I agree with my hon. Friend.

I was speaking about the impact on local businesses, charities and trusts. Can the Minister confirm what the Government are doing to ensure the safety of staff and volunteers? This is an important point, because they are often having to travel a distance when their nearest bank branch has closed. Although that is a commercial decision, we cannot have our constituents put in a precarious situation when carrying cash at the end of the day or after a fundraising event.

At the heart of this, banks tell us that the decision to close a branch is driven by customer behaviour and demand, but I would argue that banks are pushing this change. Speaking to branch staff and customers to

[Ms Qaisar]

examine the trends does not necessarily provide the full context of what is happening in a particular area. Does the Minister agree that the UK Government should consider introducing an independent body to conduct independent impact assessments, including of the impact on a local community, before a bank closes a branch? Such a localised assessment could ensure that decisions made in a local area are reflective of the needs of the local community.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): Lanark serves a much wider rural area. Access to mobile banking and different types of accessibility is so important when rural communities are left without access to banking, as people are often told that their bank is 20 miles away, inaccessible and unavailable to most.

Ms Qaisar: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and Members will not be surprised to hear that I completely agree with what she has just stated.

At the onset of the covid pandemic so many businesses across the country literally switched overnight to cashless payment systems. The concerns about the move towards a cashless society have been raised numerous times by Members from across this House. However, the shift to digital banking has only been accelerated by the ongoing pandemic. While we continue to move away from cash and towards the digital era of banking, it is vital that we ensure that no one is left behind. I mean no disrespect to my colleagues, especially those on the SNP Benches, but there is a wee bit of an age difference between myself and some of the others. I am stereotypical of those young people who are more likely to use digital wallets, smartphone apps and online banking. Recent statistics show us that about 76% of people in the UK use some form of digital money management, and this trend is increasing, especially in the younger sections of society, with more than 50% of 25 to 34-year-olds willing to go completely digital when handling their finances. That does not translate throughout older demographics and more vulnerable groups in society.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): As one of the older generation, I get my hon. Friend's point: we absolutely are moving towards a digital economy. There is no doubt about that, but access to cash is absolutely required for the most impoverished in our society and, yes, some of our older colleagues. Does she agree that the banks and, importantly, the post offices have to look at this closely, because as high street banks close, the ATMs often go with them? They provide access to cash and, importantly, access to cash to the penny, which is still required.

Ms Qaisar: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and what he is saying is important. Of course, when I was talking about older Members, I was not referring to him at all. [Laughter.] At that point, I will swiftly move on.

Throughout the course of the pandemic, we have witnessed the need for a more digitally connected society, both for work and socialising. Banking, however, is not excluded from that. While there has been a sharp increase in the uptake of digital banking, simultaneously we

have also seen a mass exodus of banks from our high streets. This poses huge concerns for those who are not digitally literate, have no access to technology or are simply uncomfortable with the transition away from cash. An important point to remember is that where some of these people are not using digital wallets, online banking or digital banking it is through no fault of their own; they might have financial struggles that mean they are unable to get access to mobile data or wi-fi. That is hindering their access and we are not necessarily talking about people from an older age demographic. The 2019 Access to Cash final report found that more than 8 million people would struggle directly as a consequence of a cashless society. Cash is therefore essential to ensuring that vulnerable groups such as older people or low-income households, who often have limited access to digital banking, are not excluded.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): As the granny of the House, I have to say that I have an electronic wallet on my phone. However, does my hon. Friend agree that it is about time the Government brought forward their access to cash Bill, which has been promised for quite a long time?

Ms Qaisar: I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for raising that important point. She has raised it on a number of occasions and I fully support her in all her comments.

While we are trying to become this more digitally inclusive and digitally literate society, there are projects going on in that regard. For example, in my constituency, a project funded by Connecting Scotland, a Scottish Government initiative, has been working alongside the community to help people to get online and into the digital age at Lorne Gardens retirement complex in Salsburgh. The project supplies elderly constituents with 200 digital devices and mi-fi boxes so that on Tuesday nights tenants can meet to share skills with an aim to building up relationships and increasing their confidence when using their devices. I am delighted that projects such as this are providing older constituents with vital digital skills that could be used for navigating online banking. However, this should not detract from the fact that many older people still ultimately prefer traditional methods of banking. The really important point about such projects is that they teach people transferable skills, because once they get online and are able to use digital banking, they can use those skills to navigate other websites—and maybe not become too addicted to online shopping.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): In countries such as Estonia—I am delighted to be co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group—it is a constitutional right for all citizens to have access to the internet, and therefore the transition to the digital age is a far more equal process. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is something the United Kingdom needs to think about?

Ms Qaisar: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. As I said, if we are able to help people across all sections of society to get online, even in just one aspect such as digital banking, these are transferable skills that they can then use in digital literacy. That is absolutely key and it has to be an initiative for the UK Government.

Although the move towards digital banking is happening rapidly, it is vital that we as politicians, banks and Governments make a conscious effort to ensure that everyone is included in this process. While 46% of Londoners are using digital-only banking, this is far from the reality for people north of the border. The responsibility of ensuring that everyone across the country is financially included therefore falls at the feet of this Government. It is imperative that we do everything we can to ensure that no one is left behind.

7.22 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Frazer):

It is a privilege to respond to this debate on behalf of the Government. I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar) on securing her first Adjournment debate on an issue on which she has been vocal and campaigned hard. My hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury takes the issue of bank closures very seriously, and he would have represented the Government's position here today were he not on ministerial business abroad.

The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts talked about the importance of people going into banks. The reality is that the way that consumers engage and interact with their banks is changing, with increasing numbers using digital services to manage their affairs. It was interesting to hear her talk about her own experience and that of her generation in terms of how people are now accessing their money.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: The reality is that the experience of those states that have moved to a digital framework, such as Estonia, highlights the fact that this transition needs to recognise those who find it most difficult. Therefore, we need to be in a position where people who still use cash are able to do so whenever they need to.

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Member makes an important point. I will come on to the ways in which we are ensuring that those who need to access a physical location are indeed able to do so.

According to UK Finance, as of 2019, half of adults in this country used mobile banking. In the 12 months to February 2020, half of adults with a day-to-day bank account carried out their banking activities face to face in-branch, down from almost two thirds—63%—just three years earlier. The Government want to ensure that people have appropriate access to banking services, and the transition towards digital banking brings many opportunities for individuals and businesses. It is our view that the Government cannot and should not seek to reverse the changes we are seeing in the market and in customer behaviour. Nor should the Government determine firms' commercial strategies in response to these changes. Having the flexibility to respond to changes in the market is part of what made the UK's financial services sector one of the most competitive in the world, and the Government want to protect that success.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): While Governments should not be setting commercial objectives for the banks, I was told by a representative of a bank which had shut both a branch and removed the automated teller machine that it cost as much to keep an ATM as

to run a branch, so I think we need to say to the banks—while not imposing any commercial criteria on them—that they should at least be honest about the reasons why branches are shutting.

Lucy Frazer: I am confident that banks will be carefully looking at how much it costs to run an ATM versus a people-staffed bank and will make those decisions accordingly, but we recognise the impact of branch closures on people and their communities, and the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) talked about the importance of engagement with communities. Since 2017, the UK's largest banks and building societies have been signed up to the access to banking standard, which commits them to ensuring that they inform customers about any branch closures, that they explain the reasons for the closure, and that they clearly outline customers' options for continued access to banking services.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Lucy Frazer: I am going to carry on because the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts, who secured the debate, made many points and I want to respond to them.

The Financial Conduct Authority has also set out its expectations of firms when deciding whether to reduce the number of their physical branches or the number of free-to-use ATMs. FCA guidance states that firms are expected to carefully consider the impact of a planned closure on their customers' everyday banking and cash needs.

The hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Reading East (Matt Rodda) talked about the importance of going into a physical location for those such as the elderly and the disabled. As well as the innovations around mobile and online banking, there are alternative options to access everyday banking services via telephone banking and also, importantly, via the Post Office. The Post Office plays a significant role in servicing people's everyday banking needs across the UK. The Post Office banking framework allows 99% of personal banking and 95% of business customers to deposit cheques, check their balance, and withdraw and deposit cash at the 11,500 Post Office branches right across the UK. As the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts pointed out, it is important that there is somewhere to take that cash, which is why the Post Office provides such an important service.

Marion Fellows: Will the Minister give way?

Lucy Frazer: I am going to come on now to the point the hon. Lady made about access to cash. Access to cash is one of the services that bank branches and post offices help to deliver, but the Government understand the importance of cash to the daily lives of millions of people across the UK, particularly vulnerable people, which is exactly why we have committed to legislate to protect access to cash.

Last year, the Government consulted on further proposals for new laws to make sure people need to travel only a reasonable distance to pay in or take out cash. The Government's proposals are intended to support the continued use of cash in people's daily lives and help enable local businesses to continue accepting cash by

[Lucy Frazer]

protecting deposit facilities. We are carefully considering the responses to the consultation as we develop legislation and will set out next steps in due course. Encouragingly, following the Government's commitment to legislate, firms are working together through the Access to Cash Action Group to develop new initiatives to provide shared services.

I wish to touch on another way for people to access the banking system in person. The hon. Member for Reading East mentioned banking hubs. The introduction of shared banking hubs is an exciting development. Last year saw the successful pilot of the initiative, with two bank hubs offering counter services run by the Post Office and dedicated spaces for customers to see community bankers from their own bank. The findings of the pilot revealed that, as of October 2021, £4.65 million of cash had been deposited at the two pilot sites. Almost a quarter of local businesses said the pilots meant they no longer needed to close their shop to get or deposit cash. As a result, the two bank hubs have been extended until at least the spring of 2023.

Building on the experience gained in the pilots, last December the industry announced its intention to introduce five more Post Office bank hubs in Acton, Brixham, Angus, Knaresborough and Syston. The bank hubs are

a commercial initiative, meaning it is for industry to play a key role in the provision of appropriate facilities for customers.

At the beginning of her speech, the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts talked about HSBC's announcement of the closure of some banks. I reassure her that all the branches that are to close have a post office within 1.5 miles for everyday banking transactions.

Marion Fellows: Will the Minister give way?

Lucy Frazer: I am going to conclude because I fear I am running out of time.

The Government understand what is at stake here and are working hard to do right by communities up and down the country. Banking is changing in ways to which industry can and should respond but, as I have said, it is also right that the impact of branch closures on people and communities is understood, considered and, where possible, mitigated, so that everyone, whoever they are and wherever they live, continues to have access to the services they need.

Question put and agreed to.

7.31 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 16 March 2022

[MR PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

Peace and Stability in the Balkans

9.30 am

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the maintenance of peace and stability in the Balkans.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has sent frightening shockwaves throughout the European continent, and there is particular concern in Finland and Sweden; in the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia; in Moldova, regarding Transnistria; and in the Balkans.

I well remember, as we all do, the terrible bloodshed in the western Balkans following the break-up of Yugoslavia. I visited Bosnia in 2013 as part of an inter-parliamentary delegation. I recall the harrowing stories I heard from people belonging to all ethnic groups, and I will never forget travelling by bus through the Balkans and visiting Sarajevo. We passed through numerous communities in the Balkans and saw graveyard after graveyard in every community.

A little later in the conflict, only the intervention of NATO in Kosova and Serbia prevented even more appalling bloodshed when Serbian nationalists, led by Slobodan Milošević, tried to ethnically cleanse Kosova of Muslim Albanians. Whatever our views and our differences in this Parliament, we must all be united in our resolution to stop that happening again.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter to the Chamber. He is talking about the exclusion of aircraft and an exclusion zone. Perhaps he agrees that today, when we think of Ukraine, we do so for the very same reason that a no-fly zone was wanted in the Balkans—because it would stop the murder of children, babies and elderly people, the killing of innocents and the destruction of property. Does he agree that if we want to make sure that the Russians cannot win, we need a no-fly zone so that we can protect people?

Wayne David: I certainly understand the sentiments the hon. Member expresses so strongly, and I am sure we all agree with those sentiments, but we must look carefully at what a no-fly zone might mean in the situation we face in Ukraine. A no-fly zone would be easy to do, but it is wrong to draw exact parallels between what happened in the western Balkans and what is happening in Ukraine today.

Even before the invasion of Ukraine, there was growing concern that Bosnia and Herzegovina could once again be engulfed by ethnic bloodshed of the kind that we saw in the 1990s. The fragile Dayton peace agreement had been under strain for some time, and the President of Republika Srpska had advised of his goal of fracturing the Bosnian state. The Bosnian Serbs had announced that they were going to boycott key institutions of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Serbia has lent implied support to Dodik and his supporters in Bosnia—a country that is already seeing real unrest. I would be interested to hear the hon. Member's views on the risks associated with an emboldened Dodik and how those risks might spread across the region.

Wayne David: That is the essence of my speech, and I shall come to that point, but the hon. Member has put her finger on the centrality of the issue and the difficulties that we face.

That withdrawal from the state apparatus of Bosnia and Herzegovina, including the ending of Serb involvement in the tax system, the judiciary and, crucially, the army, is tremendously important. After meeting with the President of Serbia in January, the leader of Republika Srpska, Dodik, stated that a return to Bosnian state institutions could occur only if reference to genocide by Republika Srpska entities were prohibited. The boycott of Bosnian state institutions began in July last year after the EU High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina outlawed the denial of the 1995 Srebrenica massacre. That is worth remembering, because in July 1995 over 8,000 Bosniak men and boys were massacred in cold blood. There can be no attempt to forget that or erase it from history. To attempt to do so is fundamentally wrong.

There is no doubt that for some time the Kremlin has been supporting the destabilisation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. For a number of years Putin has been encouraging Serb nationalism, putting arms into Serb hands and stirring up ethnic hatred. In November last year the EU's High Representative wrote that the country was facing

"the greatest existential threat of the postwar period".

That was true when it was said in November 2021. Unfortunately, it is even more true today.

Recently, the United Kingdom, the European Union and the United States have reaffirmed their support for the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. There has also been condemnation of the decision by the Parliament of Republika Srpska to start planning for the withdrawal of the republic from the state institutions and apparatus of Bosnia. Following a United Nations Security Council mandate, EUFOR, the EU-led force, has been deployed in Bosnia and Herzegovina for some time. I am pleased to say that its strength has been increased from 600 to 1,100, but that increase is woefully inadequate given the scale of the crisis that is unfolding.

I am pleased that the British Government have appointed Sir Stuart Peach as special envoy to the western Balkans. Sir Stuart is a former chairman of the NATO military committee and UK Chief of the Defence Staff, and I am sure he is already making a difference, even though his appointment is relatively recent. Not only is he demonstrating Britain's commitment to maintaining peace in the region, but he is helping to address some of the more important issues that have to be confronted if long-term stability is to be achieved in the region.

His task is enormous, not least because there can be little doubt that Dodik is now very close to President Putin. Dodik and Putin met in Moscow in December, and Russia has refused to endorse international statements that have expressed concern at Dodik's actions. Dodik has also stated that if the European Union were to

[Wayne David]

impose sanctions, Republika Srpska would declare itself an independent state. The situation is extremely serious and demands our attention.

I have focused on the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but we should also be concerned about the developments in North Macedonia, Serbia itself, Kosova and Montenegro. I do not have time to go through all of those situations, so I will simply refer to the situation in Kosova. Since the NATO intervention in 1999, there has been acute tension between Kosovans and Serbians, and between Kosova and Serbia itself. It is particularly worrying that Putin has cited NATO's intervention in Kosova in 1999 as some kind of justification for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. That is absurd and should be absolutely rejected.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): As the hon. Member may be aware, I and other members of the Select Committee on International Development visited Bosnia only last month and discussed the situation with parliamentarians there. Does he share my concerns about any future aggression from President Putin in the region, and will he press the Minister on what steps this Government are taking to safeguard the security of the Balkans in the light of the current geopolitical crisis?

Wayne David: Absolutely. As I move towards my conclusion, that is precisely the point I want to emphasise, because our Government have to do more than they have already done.

Earlier this month, the Kosovan Prime Minister visited London and warned of Russian influence over Serbia. He warned that, as the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) suggested, there could be a proxy war in the western Balkans. He made particular reference to tensions that erupted in Kosova in the border area with Serbia only last year. There was a seemingly insignificant dispute over what number plates should be displayed on cross-border journeys, but one thing led to another and Kosovan special forces were deployed to the border area. That was followed by the deployment of Serb military jets and tanks. That clearly highlighted how tensions are simmering below the surface and do not take a lot to boil up. That demands our attention to the situation.

To be honest, over the past few years the United Kingdom and other western countries have not given the western Balkans the attention that they deserve. I am pleased to say that is changing, but change must happen more radically and quickly. The UK has given logistical support to EUFOR but needs to do much more. We must consider allocating our own forces to strengthen EUFOR, possibly even deploying forces ourselves in a peacekeeping role. That option should be carefully examined by our Government.

We also need to work more closely with our European allies, to ensure that there is a co-ordinated and sustained diplomatic and economic strategy in place. It is all too easy for us to say, "Well, we have left the European Union. We are not going to be so engaged with these issues." That is a profound mistake. Brexit is one thing, but it does not remove the need—it is greater than ever—for us to have foreign policy and military co-operation with our European allies. The situation in the western Balkans highlights that dramatically.

We need diplomatic initiatives with all our European partners, because it is clear that the Russians like to play off one country against another. If there is any fracture in solidarity among western nations, we see the Russians play on that. We must ensure that, wherever humanly possible, Britain, its western European allies and the United States speak with one coherent and concerted voice. That must be a diplomatic priority.

We also need to look at what economic tools are available. We are all aware of the situation in Ukraine and how the British Government have gradually increased the deployment of sanctions. We also need to look carefully at the situation in the western Balkans but, again, we must do that in concert with our European allies.

Those are the points I make in conclusion. It is important that we do not see this as a party issue that divides us. We must find common ground and work together to give solidarity to Bosnia and Herzegovina at this crucial time.

9.44 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Mr Bone. I thank the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) for setting the scene with expertise, knowledge and a deep interest. I know he intends to retire at the end of this Parliament and we shall miss him; his contributions are always significant and helpful, due to his years of experience, for which I thank him. I also thank him for leading today's debate on such an important issue.

There are so many things happening in the world, and I will talk about Ukraine, as we probably all will. I am ever mindful of the responsibility that the Minister and the Government have on their shoulders. We pray for our Ministers every day, because we think it is really important that our Prime Minister and Government have the wisdom and knowledge that they need when decisions are made. As I mentioned in my intervention, I support the introduction of a no-fly zone. That is my opinion, but I understand the issues and what the implications are. Maybe I see things too simplistically sometimes, but I want to know how we can protect the Ukrainians, because we need to be doing so.

We have heard so much in the media and in this House about the recent invasion of Ukraine by Russia. There is not a morning or evening that I do not feel cut to the very core of my heart when I see the things that are happening and feel powerless to physically help people—sometimes it overcomes me. We must focus on the priority to help the Ukrainian people to fight the devastation. However, this debate is about the Balkans, particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina, and we must not forget the smaller non-NATO states, which have the potential to be targeted as well. The Minister and others might agree that the fight in Ukraine today is a fight in the Balkans tomorrow. It is a fight in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria, and on the doorstep of west Germany and France. Maybe the fight will be on the white cliffs of Dover at some time in the future, so the fight today in Ukraine is a fight to which we have to be physically, mentally and emotionally committed in every way we can.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, concerns have rightly been raised about the impact that it will have on the Balkan states. Historically, Russia has

maintained rocky relations with different states in the Balkans, playing politics with them all. The Russians have been friends of some and enemies of others, and then they have changed their minds a few weeks later and entered into different relationships.

Margaret Ferrier: The Kosovan President has previously accused Russia of using Serbia to destabilise the Balkan region, and the Kosovan Prime Minister has said that Putin wants the state of Kosovo to fail in order to show that NATO success was temporary. Does the hon. Gentleman perceive there to be a risk to the stability in Kosovo and a need for it to join NATO?

Jim Shannon: I do think that, because Russia thrives on instability. The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and I thank her for her intervention.

Historically, Russia has maintained rocky relations. I also understand that Putin has a very clear relationship with the Bosnian Serbs. There is an Ulsterism that is particularly relevant. Back home, we would say—forgive me if this is rather graphic, but it is the way we see it—that Russia and Serbia suck off the same hind tit. It is very clear what the Ulsterism means: they both think the same, they both feed off the same person, and they both act together. As the hon. Member for Caerphilly said, Russia and Serbia are hand in hand in their aspirations and goals.

Regardless of whether small states such as Kosovo and Montenegro are part of NATO, we have a responsibility to protect their citizens from Russian invasion and violence. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has stated that, as of 14 March 2022, there have been more than 2,000 civilian deaths as a result of Russia's military attack. Looking towards Bosnia, we have to consider what could happen in the Balkans in the light of what is happening in Ukraine. A further 1,500 people have been injured in Ukraine, and I am mindful of the picture of a lady being carried on a stretcher after the Russians attacked a hospital in Mariupol. It seems that she and her baby did not make it. It is very obvious that the lady was physically and mentally traumatised. The impact of Russian aggression will be the same in the Balkans if they can get away with it.

Ukraine has been crippled by greed and evil, and we must assume that Putin does not intend to stop at Ukraine; the EU, NATO, the UK and the US must be prepared to respond if the current situation deteriorates. I want to put on the record—something that we do not do often enough, but need to—my thanks to the Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace). I know about some of the battles that he has fought in fulfilling our commitment to supply anti-tank missiles. Incidentally, those missiles are made at Thales in Northern Ireland; we have a talent for many things in Northern Ireland, but we seem to have a special talent for that. The now 4,000 anti-tank weapons are proving to be very effective against Russian tanks and armoured vehicles. So we want the support, and the Secretary of State has done that. I put on record my thanks. He has fought, through the obstacles that civil servants throw up, to help. We are asking today for that same commitment to preserve peace in the Balkans.

We must also employ atrocity prevention tools and policy, especially in the states of Bosnia and Herzegovina where society is full of tension and division. The hon.

Member for Caerphilly said he had seen a small thing. It looks like a small thing, but it could very soon become a large thing—a confrontation and a battle over that issue. While we maintain the focus on Ukraine, having wider diplomatic engagement across the Balkan states ensures that we are able to practice mitigation tactics further. Protection Approaches, a charity based in London, has stated that the situation in Ukraine must not limit our capacity to respond appropriately to the risks in the Balkans, as the hon. Member for Caerphilly has outlined. We cannot allow the violence and terrorism to be mirrored in the areas surrounding Ukraine and risk more death and loss of life.

Today I look to my Minister and my Government and ask, where does the responsibility lie in co-ordinating the United Kingdom's approach to the atrocities and ongoing risks of further potential devastation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and the western Balkans? In addition to this, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania have been added to Russia's list of "enemy states." My goodness me, who has Russia not made an enemy of today? They hate the world; they hate their very own people—there is absolutely no end to it. It frustrates me greatly when I think that here is one person—Putin, along with his army—who are pursuing death and destruction; and their plans and their eyes are set on bigger things. They refer to those countries as "enemy states" for aligning themselves with sanctions against Russia, causing direct concern for potential invasion.

Everyone in this House was encouraged by that media lady on Russian TV who took her stand; We are very conscious that she is a person with tremendous courage, and she will be in our thoughts.

We must come to terms with the fact that Putin does not intend to stop. Only a few days ago, a Russian missile was launched, and landed some 10 miles from the Polish border. It is crucial that we pave the way to protect other small states while we can. We have a big job to do; the Minister has an incredibly big job to do; our Government have an incredibly big job to do. We look to them, and support them in their methodologies, moving forward. The talk of war has already been discussed in Bosnia and Herzegovina and they are already at risk of facing a resurgence of secessionist tendencies.

While the protection and refuge of the Ukrainian people must be at the forefront and pinnacle of our efforts, as has been said we must not forget the smaller states, which are also at the hands of Russian terror, destruction and murderous thoughts. I urge the Government and the Minister to have plans in place, should there be a future invasion into the Balkans. I think the hon. Member for Caerphilly was right to set the scene today—I thank him for it. We all know that there are many things in the world to keep an eye on, and the responsibility of our Ministers and our Government is one of overbearing pressure at times. I support our Ministers and our Government in the policies that they are taking forward, although I would like to take them forward a wee bit harder, perhaps—but that is just me talking. Others have a different opinion, and I understand that.

9.54 am

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Bone. It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—it is always a pleasure to be in a debate with

[*Fleur Anderson*]

him. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) on securing this debate and on his opening speech, which was based on his extensive expertise on the region. He rightly called for additional time to be given to talking about securing and maintaining peace and stability in the Balkans. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments. I am glad that we are able to discuss this subject, and I think there is a lot of unity across the House that we want to see peace maintained in the region; we need to look at other areas affected by the Ukrainian war, including those where there was already a fragile peace before the war.

No one wants to think that there will be war in their area. When I worked as an aid worker in Bosnia, I spoke to many communities. I asked when they thought there would be war in their villages—when they thought they would have to flee. All of them knew it was very near—there were soldiers in the next-door valley—but they never thought it would come to their home, until it did. We see that in Ukraine. We hoped that the conflict would not come to this. We need to look ahead at what could happen in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I am co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the prevention of genocide and crimes against humanity, and vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Bosnia and Herzegovina. I was a humanitarian aid worker during the war in Bosnia, living in Belgrade and then in Banja Luka. Four years later, I returned with my baby to head Christian Aid's Bosnia office, rebuilding villages in north-west Bosnia and supporting the return of refugees. So I knew a bit of what it feels like to live amongst a war in a region—the chaos that ensues and the uprooting of people's lives—and how long it takes to rebuild afterwards.

This House is united in support for peace, and for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all the states in the region, including Ukraine, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, I think that unfortunately the Government's policy on the Balkans could go further and I will focus on three points—Russia, sanctions and civil society.

If any Member here or anyone reading the debate in *Hansard* thinks that Putin does not have designs on the Balkans as well as Ukraine, they need to think again, and if they think that peace is not very fragile indeed in the Balkan states, especially in the Republika Srpska, they need to think again. The violence in Ukraine makes clear Putin's intention to fuel instability and division across the whole region. The Balkans is no exception.

The UK still has no atrocity prevention strategy for any of its offices, including those in this region, or as part of its policy towards Ukraine. Such a strategy would mean looking at early warning systems, training civil servants, learning from best practice in other areas, and specifically taking action to prevent atrocities.

The risks have already been increasing, particularly with regard to Bosnia and Herzegovina, as my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly noted. Six months ago, there was talk of potential war. Piece by piece, Milorad Dodik, the leader of Republika Srpska, is dismantling the Dayton peace treaty. That cannot be allowed to happen. Lines must be drawn.

For years, Dodik has been advocating the separation of Republika Srpska from Bosnia—for it to be part of Serbia. With support from Russia and Serbia, he

has recently intensified his secessionist campaign. On 10 February, Republika Srpska lawmakers voted to create a high prosecutorial judicial council, which will have the power to choose its own judges and prosecutors. He is also working on creating a Bosnian Serb army, a separate judiciary and tax system, and is continuing with genocide denial. It cannot be said often enough that there can be no denial of the genocide in Srebrenica. In July 1995, more than 8,000 men and boys were killed in Srebrenica. To deny that it happened, and to fuel nationalist sentiment within the region, is almost an act of war.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady and others in this Chamber will have heard the right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) recall in graphic detail some of his experiences of genocide and murder in the Balkans. There is not a time that I do not listen to him and feel incredibly moved. I think the hon. Lady has heard him as well. For those who perhaps have not heard his story—few in the Chamber have not—it will always bring back the cold, brutal reality of what happened, which the hon. Lady is referring to.

Fleur Anderson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that. I have met many of the relatives of those who disappeared that day in Srebrenica, and I have spoken to many who, even years afterwards, hoped that their relative was not there because they had not had the proof, which it was absolutely heartbreaking to know. The reverberation carries on not only with all those directly affected but through the generations. When we say “never again”, we must ensure that it is never again, and that we note the build-up of potential war and conflict and a fragile peace being shattered in the region. We can have no excuse for not seeing it coming. We have no excuse for not taking action to prevent anything like Srebrenica happening again.

The Foreign Secretary said that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office knew Russia was going to invade Ukraine, but made no preparations for the human rights crisis that would follow; and we have seen chaos ensue in the last few weeks. Preparations need to be made in Bosnia now. So I would like to question the Minister today, and hope he will tell us what preparations are being made to ensure that peace is built and created, and that any moves to war are being stopped in the Balkan region.

Wayne David: We are seeing terrible scenes as millions of people leave Ukraine, but it must also be our concern if conflict re-erupts in the Balkans and we also see large numbers of people moving into western Europe from the Balkans. We have to be aware of that and must put in place preparations should that happen. It underlines the fact that we need to do everything possible to stop conflict erupting in the first place.

Fleur Anderson: Absolutely; I thank my hon. Friend for that reflection. Given the history of the region, if someone has already endured conflict and already fled with their family to another region of Bosnia, or to Germany or another country during the war, they might have returned and now be seeing the threat arising again. As they see what is happening in Ukraine, they will think, “Shall I stay? Is it safer to leave?” So we must prepare for that, and for more numbers on top of the huge numbers affected by the Ukraine crisis.

Sanctions is another area where we could take action. A smart and creative sanctions policy for the western Balkans, designed and implemented as soon as possible, would help to mitigate the rising risks, and could be that line in the sand that we can create. We could say to Dodik, as the EU and the US have, “You have already gone too far to undermine Dayton, so we are going to sanction you.” We have not yet said that to Dodik and other members of his regime. Is this the time to say it? What talks are being held? Perhaps the Minister can tell us.

Finally, I want to speak about civil society. If we are to maintain peace and stability in the Balkans—maintaining it is the key issue—strengthening civil society is crucial. The price of eternal peace is not just eternal vigilance but eternal peacebuilding. Dodik does not have the massive support among the Serbs in Bosnia that he likes to appear as though he has. There is an opportunity to support moderate voices on all sides who want to see peace in their country and community, including those from civil society. It is important to remember that genocide and crimes against humanity are usually well planned and organised. They are preceded by a polarisation of views and caused by a manipulation of public fears and grievances, and sometimes even deliberate and targeted attacks on moderates, political and civil society leaders and freedom of the press. All of the signs are there and can be watched over.

It is hard to overstate the importance of civil society in winning over hearts and minds for peace in such situations. There are abundant examples in conflict settings, through investment in social cohesion and peace education work. Around the world, we can see in South Sudan and the Central African Republic that community-based prevention work has led to young people handing in their weapons and working together across identity groups. Mothers are setting up groups to say, “No more war in our society. We want to see peace.”

I want to pay tribute to two inspiring women from Republika Srpska who I recently met and spoke to online, who have been doing magnificent work in this regard. The first is Velma Šarić, who is an investigative reporter, researcher, academic and peacebuilder. She is the founder and CEO of the Sarajevo-based Post-Conflict Research Centre, which was established in 2010. She lived under siege at the start of the war, and she told me about all the peacebuilding work that that organisation is doing. The second is Tatjana Milovanović. She has been a peacebuilder in Bosnia for 10 years and is now a programme director at the Post-Conflict Research Centre. There are peacebuilders. We can work with them and support them, and that should be a crucial intervention by the British Government, the British people and Members of Parliament.

I say to the Minister: can we have an atrocity prevention strategy for our teams in the region? What work are we doing to actively support civil society? We cannot take peace and stability in the Balkans for granted—none of us in this room do. We need to have these conversations much more widely, and I hope the FCDO does as well. As someone who has lived in the region during its darkest days, I have seen how quickly hate and polarisation can infect people’s hearts and minds and turn a peaceful, multi-ethnic integrated society into an extremely divided one, where one side is actually shooting into the town they were living in. Personally, I feel this is the closest

that peace has ever been to unravelling in the region. The UK has a very important role to play in ensuring that it does not. Let us act now before it is too late.

10.7 am

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Bone. I thank the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) for securing this vital and timely debate. I also thank the eloquent speakers who have contributed to the debate for their experience and insight into the Western Balkans. Next month the world will mark the 30th anniversary of the beginning of the Balkan war—a war that resulted in up to 100,000 people being killed, caused 2 million people to be displaced and saw, horrifically, the first genocide in Europe in 1995 since the second world war, where over 8,000 Bosniak men and boys were massacred in Srebrenica by Serb forces.

I too have memories of that time, not because I was in Bosnia, but because I was living in the Netherlands. I lived with a community of refugees who came from each of the six states of the former Yugoslavia, who were all fleeing for the same reason: because on the ground it was unbearable to live. Neighbours were fighting with neighbours, and family members were fighting with each other. They saw horrific consequences, so this subject touches me.

It is a great tragedy that, as we speak here today, there is war in Europe once again. Images of Russia’s brutal, bloody and barbaric invasion of Ukraine, with the systematic targeting of civilians and public infrastructure, have been incredibly distressing to see. The suffering of innocent people, including pregnant women, children and newborn infants, must never be normalised or accepted. Our urgent and completely justified focus on the war in Ukraine must not distract our attention from other conflict areas of concern in Europe, and we must not lose sight of the precarious political climate in the Balkans.

Just three days before Russia began its invasion of Ukraine, the EU Foreign Ministers had to meet to discuss crisis-averting in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell commenting:

“The nationalist and separatist rhetoric is increasing...and jeopardising the stability and even the integrity of the country”.

In November, the international community’s High Representative of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Christian Schmidt, warned that the country is in imminent danger of breaking apart and there is a “very real” prospect of a return to conflict. The Dayton accords, which brought the Bosnian war to an end in 1995 and created a complex political system for Bosnia and Herzegovina to manage ethnic tensions, are being undermined. That poses a huge danger to the stability of the region.

As we heard, threats by the Bosnian Serb leader, Milorad Dodik, to boycott the country’s major institutions—including the armed forces, top judiciary body and tax administration, to be replaced by several new bodies—and secede the Republika Srpska, are a clear violation of the peace accords. The fact that that was in response to an announcement, by a former High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, that anyone who denied that genocide or war crimes had been committed during the 1990s would face jail time, is huge cause for concern.

[Chris Law]

Yet, despite increasing tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina since summer 2021, the UK Government have been slow to respond. That is indeed alarming. The Magnitsky sanctions are a powerful tool in the UK's diplomatic arsenal, but the Government's webpage devoted to UK sanctions relating to Bosnia and Herzegovina has not been updated since December 2020. The US Treasury sanctioned Dodik for significant corruption and destabilising activities in January of this year, and a leaked internal document from the EU has recommended that sanctions are imposed on Republika Srpska and that financial support is withheld, if the crisis continues in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Moving on to some questions, will the Minister commit to increasing the Magnitsky sanctions regime against hostile actors within Bosnia and Herzegovina? If so, will the UK Government commit to making those decisions through scrupulous discussions with international allies? As with the war in Ukraine, it is vital that we maintain close alignment with the EU on matters of European security, as has already been suggested here today.

We also cannot ignore the malevolent role of Russia in fuelling the instability in the Balkans. It has been argued that Vladimir Putin considers NATO intervention in Kosovo a most important recent international event, and wants the state to fail to show that NATO success was temporary, as it was in Iraq and Afghanistan. Russia has not recognised Kosovo's independence and has blocked it from joining the United Nations.

Russia has allied itself with Serbia on this issue, and has been accused of using Serbia to destabilise the region. Although Serbia has declared support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and voted in favour of the UN resolution condemning Russia's actions, it has not aligned itself with EU sanctions against Russia.

Given that context, it is not surprising that there have been reports that Milorad Dodik tried to prevent Bosnian officials from voting to condemn Russia's actions at the UN. It has been alleged that Dodik sent a letter to the UN Secretary-General, through the Russian mission, stating that the Bosnian UN ambassador should not vote, as the Bosnian presidency had not agreed a joint stance on the matter.

There is evidence of Russian interference in the Balkans from the recent past, when it condemned Montenegro's accession to NATO. I should also point to news reports yesterday that the Russian-backed parliamentarians in Montenegro are pushing for advance elections to try to turn their minority into a majority in Parliament, so that it can leave NATO. Two pro-Russian politicians and nine Serbs were subsequently sentenced for staging that coup, with two alleged Russian agents tried in absentia.

Balkan leaders have made stark warnings. Šefik Džaferović—I hope I have pronounced that correctly—the Bosniak member of Bosnia and Herzegovina's presidency, said,

“Dodik is trying to take advantage of the fact that the attention of the west is focused on Ukraine”.

Kosovo's Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, added,

“I fear that the longer the war lasts in Ukraine, the greater the chances of spillover in the western Balkans. And that is because it is in the interest of the Russian Federation to have new battlegrounds.”

We need to heed those warnings, as any proxy ethno-nationalist war in the Balkans would be devastating, as history has shown us repeatedly.

The Minister for Europe and North America has previously said,

“we see the hand of Russia at play here”.—[*Official Report*, 9 November 2021; Vol. 703, c. 178.]

If that is the case, we need to know what the FCDO is doing about it. What assessment have the UK Government, along with our EU and North American allies, made of that influence, and how has that changed since the invasion of Ukraine? Do we have a strategy for a proxy conflict scenario erupting? Are the UK Government actively investigating Kremlin-linked entities in the UK contributing to political destabilisation in the Balkans? Will there be a broader sanctions package to sanction Russian individuals promoting or enabling conflict in any part of Europe?

A return to violence is not inevitable but the warning signs must be responded to. For years, voices in civil society and Select Committees of this House have called for a cross-governmental atrocity prevention strategy, yet it still does not exist. The integrated review promised that this would be prioritised, yet in December the UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group wrote to the Prime Minister, voicing concerns that the UK systems capabilities and policies toward Bosnia and Herzegovina still lack a focus on atrocity prevention, grievance and political marginalisation.

Protection Approaches has stated:

“Bosnia is the test case of the promise made in the Prime Minister's Integrated Review to prioritise atrocity prevention. The UK is well placed to lead a coalition of Bosnia's allies in a coordinated preventative effort and fulfil its promise made.”

Where do the responsibilities lie for articulating and co-ordinating the UK Government's approach to the atrocities, and the ongoing risk of further atrocities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the western Balkans? How is the UK mapping the motivations and interrelations of potential perpetrators and the coalitions that can help to prevent violence? Do the embassies in Sarajevo, Pristina and Belgrade have emergency communications protocols in place? When will the UK publish a national atrocity prevention strategy?

I recommend that those responsible for answers to those questions read the book “Architectures of Violence” by Dr Kate Ferguson. It was published just a few months ago, and shows that when these acts of mass atrocities happen, it is systematic and calculated, not spontaneous. It is also preventable. It is clear that we still do not yet have a strategy mapped out.

Finally, I visited Bosnia and Herzegovina last month with the International Development Committee. I returned last night from a visit to Derry, where I was joined by a Bosnian delegation. The Bosnians I met were shocked and surprised that we actually have our own challenges and tensions within these islands. The message was clear that peace and security is only achievable with those on the ground working in partnership, and putting in the hard work and steely determination to resolve the issues. I pay tribute to all the women and men on the ground at grassroots level who work hard to build peace and solidarity across the divides in their communities, often risking their own security in the process. Without them, we have no peace and security.

I also pay tribute to all those in British embassies working in partnership with local NGOs and volunteers to strengthen peace and security in the western Balkans. I pay tribute to the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, which through its fellowship programmes has created opportunities for people from the western Balkans to see for themselves the hard-won victories that have built peace on our own islands. We have a duty and responsibility in our own national interest and security to work for and invest in peace and security in partnership across the western Balkans for now and into the future.

Conflict and instability are neither innate nor inevitable. Equally, peace and security are not easy—there is no quick fix and they do not grab headlines—but one thing is for sure: failure to invest will come back and bite us all badly. The world's eyes are quite rightly on Ukraine right now, but this war has been going on for eight years, not the three weeks that the media and UK Government keep repeating. There is an invaluable lesson in this: prevention is far better than a cure, and the early signs need to be acted on coherently, strategically and, most importantly, continuously. The alternative is unconscionable.

10.18 am

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Bone, and to speak in this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) on securing it. There have been powerful speeches, largely based on hon. Members' personal experiences. It is particularly a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), who gave a passionate speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly is right to highlight the worries we should all have about events beyond the terrible situation in Ukraine, whether that is in the Baltics, Moldova or the western Balkans. Many of us have been asking the FCDO questions, and I raised them with the Minister the other day. It is crucial that while our attention is rightly focused on what is happening with the atrocities in Ukraine, we do not ignore or fail to recognise the very serious risk that events elsewhere in our own continent could descend into chaos, violence and conflict.

My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly spoke powerfully of his own experiences in the Balkans. The horrors of the 1990s are seared into the minds of many people across this country, including many British servicepeople who honourably and bravely served in many stabilisation missions across the continent, such as those involved in the operations in Kosovo and elsewhere. Indeed, members of my own family served in operations in Bosnia and there are Members of the House who served in a military capacity and in humanitarian organisations; my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) and others loom large among those with such experiences. The right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) is not with us today, but he has spoken to me personally and very powerfully on many occasions about his own experiences during his time with the United Nations in Bosnia.

The current risks are indeed huge. The High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina wrote last November that Bosnia is facing

“the greatest existential threat of the post-war period.”

Of course, the invasion of Ukraine and the events emanating from that have only heightened the risks for Bosnia.

Much has been said in this debate about the threats and machinations of Dodik. Of course, he has threatened to follow the Russian example; many fear that he seeks to break Republika Srpska away from the settlement that has endured for decades now in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We know that he has the support of, and close links to, the Kremlin. By his own admission, he also apparently has links to China. I hope that the Minister will say in his remarks what he makes of the serious allegations about weapons supplies supposedly coming through to the Republika Srpska, the close ties to the Kremlin and the allegations of links to China. What discussions he has had with international counterparts about those issues?

Wayne David: It is correct that much of the focus this morning is on Russia, but we should not forget that, as my hon. Friend has mentioned, China has a malign role in much of this as well. We need to take note of that, because Chinese influence is growing, as is the use of their resources, in a number of the Balkan states, particularly Serbia.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Of course, we have seen Chinese influence across other areas in which Russia seeks to cause instability. For example, we know of the Chinese influence in the Baltics and elsewhere. It is crucial that we take full account of that and have strategies to respond.

Quite rightly, there have been many questions about sanctions. I know that the Minister will not want to get drawn into the detail either of existing sanctions or of others that have not yet been proposed, but it is important to note—this point has been made strongly—that there have been sanctions from the US. I hope that the Minister can say something about the apparent differences in the approach, particularly given the steps that have already been taken, very publicly and vocally, by Dodik and others to undermine the Dayton agreement.

Beyond Bosnia, we cannot forget the situation in the other countries in the western Balkans, particularly given the alleged Russian-sponsored coup in Montenegro in 2016. Of course, Montenegro, Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia have followed the EU and others in sanctioning Russia over the situation in Ukraine. It is welcome that we see that unity of purpose and the position that they have taken—boldly and bravely, given the risks that they face. I hope that the Minister will tell us how we will support them as they seek to respond to attempts by Russia to undermine their politics and societies. They have now been designated as enemy states by Putin and Russia. We need to recognise the inherent risks for them. It would be good to hear what the Minister has to say about that, and when he last met representatives of those countries in particular, not least given the domestic political goings-on that the hon. Member for Dundee West raised in relation to Montenegro and the risks to its domestic politics.

My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly and others quite rightly highlighted that there cannot be any justifiable attempt to deny the Srebrenica massacre or the many other atrocities that took place in Balkans in the past. Those who seek to do so are simply speaking outwith the overwhelming facts. Many of us who have

[Stephen Doughty]

worked closely with Remembering Srebrenica and other organisations in the past, and declare our interests in relation to our associations with that organisation, know the reality of what happened in those terrible days in the 1990s—of course, not just in Srebrenica, but in many other places.

I absolutely agree with the points that my hon. Friend made about the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the risks posed by those who seek to undermine it, and the importance of the role that EUFOR is playing, and I join him in commending the appointment of Sir Stuart Peach.

One point that came out quite strongly in a number of contributions was that although we may no longer be a member of the European Union, we remain one of the crucial guarantors, with a key role to play in this situation. Therefore, we need to work closely with the EU and the other guarantors to ensure we have a coherent and joined-up approach to what is an increasingly worrying situation.

A couple of weeks ago, I met with Miroslav Lajčák, the EU special representative for the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, formerly the Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs, and EU special representative and High Representative to Bosnia. We discussed the crucial role that the UK plays, working alongside him and other representatives, including the current international High Representative. The EU special representative is working to achieve the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, and to improve relations and reconciliation between partners across the western Balkans as well as in that specific situation.

Could the Minister say when he last met with the EU special representative, and how he sees us working closely together over these difficult months? I completely agree with the points that have been made; we need to speak with one coherent voice. In that regard, could the Minister also tell us about his recent discussions with the High Representative, Christian Schmidt, and where the Government see the relationship between all those different, interlocking parts going in the months and weeks ahead?

As always, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made a very strong speech containing some powerful points. He was absolutely right to highlight, as many have, the concerning links between many in Serbian politics and Russia. In recent weeks, we have seen some deeply worrying scenes of Russian flags being waved in the streets of Belgrade. Are attempts being made there to whip up even more of a fervour in the current, very difficult times?

My hon. Friend the Member for Putney spoke from her immense personal experience of, and dedication to, the people of the region, which I commend her on. She was right to give similarly stark warnings about Russia's involvement in undermining this situation, and to raise the case for an atrocity prevention strategy, as did the hon. Member for Dundee West. I welcome those calls and hope the Minister can say what the Government are actually doing. They do not seem to have moved forward on this issue, but it is critical, not just in the Balkans, but in so many other situations globally.

I could not agree more with the points that my hon. Friend also made about peacebuilding and civil society. It is the people in the western Balkans—people who

have been through a great deal over recent decades—who could be the foundations for peace and, crucially, provide resilience against the forces who would attempt to break apart their country or return it once again to chaos and conflict. I hope that the Minister can set out what the FCDO is doing to fund those projects.

As we have said many times in multiple debates in this place, the Government's cutting of the aid commitment from 0.7% to 0.5% has undoubtedly had an impact on many different programmes, some of which were funded under these measures. I would like the Minister to explain what the FCDO is doing to fund peacebuilding and civil society strengthening programmes. Such programmes could provide a crucial bulwark against the forces I have referred to—Dodik, Putin or others—who seek to undermine these countries and regions and take them back to very dark times.

Lastly, the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Dundee West, was absolutely right to highlight how the Dayton settlement was being undermined, the domestic political events in Montenegro, and the need to make progress on the atrocity prevention strategy.

At the moment, the focus is rightly on Ukraine. We will be having further events on Ukraine—we had an important debate on it yesterday—but as the Minister will know from his extensive military experience, at times like these we also have to watch the flanks and the rear. We have to watch what is happening elsewhere, and we all know that the warning signs in the western Balkans were there well before the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

We have a particular duty and responsibility, not only because of our extensive involvement in the 1990s, but as one of the key guarantors in the region. It is crucial that we play that role to the utmost at this time—that we have resources in the FCDO attuned to the western Balkans and ministerial time attached to this region, and that we are making those contacts, having those conversations and funding those projects. We need to make sure that we do not end up in an even worse situation in the weeks and months to come, which we would deeply regret and, most importantly, would have devastating impacts on the people of the western Balkans. We have a critical role to play and we must continue to play it.

10.29 am

The Minister for Europe and North America (James Cleverly): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Bone, and I genuinely thank the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), my former Labour Front-Bench shadow, for initiating the debate. As we have heard, recent developments demand our attention, and they demand our action. He is right to use the debate to bring those issues to the attention of the Chamber.

Unresolved tensions in the Balkans serve only to embolden those who seek to foster division and hamper progress. The UK is leading efforts to counter destabilising activities, especially from Russia. Putin is no friend to these countries—not a friend to the people of the Balkans, not a friend to the Slavic brethren and not even a friend to the people of Russia itself.

Putin's barbaric invasion of Ukraine is casting a dark shadow across Europe, and across the Balkans in particular, and we are seeing the full breadth of Russian tactics: violations of sovereignty and territorial integrity, brazen

breaches of international law, and devastating attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure. The UK has been at the forefront of political and diplomatic efforts to stop this. We highlight and criticise Moscow for its actions on the international stage. We expose its untruths. We seek with partners to deter Russia from going further. We are building international resolve on sanctions, and supporting Ukraine with £394 million of aid, both humanitarian and other, plus military equipment and the training that we provided for the Ukrainian armed forces for many years through Operation Orbital.

The tragic situation in Ukraine underlines the need to pay close attention to the Balkans, which is the point made by the hon. Member for Caerphilly and others. That tragic situation is not unfamiliar. There are those in the Balkans who know only too well the horrors of war, and Putin's aggression has given the Balkans deep and genuine cause for concern. That has, unsurprisingly, generated huge passion, as we have seen today, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) for her direct, first-hand experience in Bosnia during and immediately after the most difficult period in that country's recent history.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is beautifully elegant in his self-deprecating way, but he sees with clarity and speaks with passion, and he is universally respected across the House for that. He calls on us all to do more and go further. I assure him that we will always look at what options are available to us to help the people of Ukraine and to help prevent the atrocities that everyone in the Chamber has highlighted as a concern.

We of course support Bosnia and Herzegovina in its territorial integrity. I assure the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) that the UK has been robust in its condemnation of the dangerous moves led by presidency member Milorad Dodik, and we will not be passive in our response. Dodik's attempts to withdraw unilaterally from state institutions, as the hon. Gentleman highlighted, threaten to undo 26 years of hard-won peace and stability. Dodik is supported by Putin, so we will continue to work in close co-ordination with our partners and allies in our response. I hope hon. Members will forgive me if I do not go into further details on what that might look like.

EUFOR, the peace stabilisation force, has increased its presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina to ensure that it is mobile and visible right across the country. We work hard to prevent Russia from closing it. EUFOR has a remit across the whole country, which it must continue to fulfil, from north to south, east to west. The UK also supports NATO headquarters in Sarajevo with personnel, and we are calling on allies to send more. We will give practical support to the armed forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the same time, we are promoting progress—

Wayne David: I want to press the Minister slightly on that point. I hear what he says about giving practical support to EUFOR, but will he give any commitment at least to looking at the possibility of British soldiers going there to stabilise the situation, in partnership with others?

James Cleverly: I hear the points made by the hon. Gentleman. Obviously, our formal membership of EUFOR stopped with our departure from the European Union,

but that should not be read in any way as a downgrading of our support for peace and stability in this region. We will, of course, look at further ways we can act to support the international community, in what should be—I believe it is—the aim of us all in this House and across the continent, to prevent the region slipping backwards into the bloodshed and violence we saw sadly in the recent past.

We will continue to promote progress towards normalising relations between Serbia and Kosovo to that end. We strongly support the EU's role in facilitating the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue. The Government in Kosovo has a strong electoral mandate, and elections are fast approaching in Serbia. The opportunity to reach an agreement is there to be grasped, and we must help both countries to seize it. A deal would be transformative, not only for them but for the entire region's security and prosperity.

The hon. Member for Caerphilly spoke about the UK working with our European allies. I can tell him and the hon. Member for Cardiff West—

Stephen Doughty: Cardiff South and Penarth.

James Cleverly: Sorry; I mean the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty)—my knowledge of Cardiff geography is not as strong as it should be, lovely city though it is—who asked about our liaison with representatives of European institutions. I had an excellent meeting last week with Miroslav Lajčák, the EU special representative for the dialogue. He rightly said at the time:

“Standing up for our shared goals and values in the western Balkans and elsewhere is now more important than ever.”

I had the privilege of meeting heads of Government from western Balkan states when the Prime Minister hosted them recently on their visits to the UK. The UK will, of course, continue to support reforms to promote peace and stability, freedom and democracy across the Balkans. Our embassy in Sarajevo supports programmes that promote security and citizen-centred reforms.

We have seen divisive and inflammatory rhetoric from Russia and some others in the region, and we wholeheartedly condemn it. The dangers of ethno-nationalist language are clear, as are concerns across the region at moves by proponents of a Serbian world approach. Reconciliation and positive relations between neighbours are essential. Through our work and engagement, we support that across the Balkans.

When I visited Bulgaria last week, I welcomed its Government's commitment to improving their relationship with North Macedonia. Romania has mobilised as a NATO ally against Putin's aggression. I applaud the warm welcome and support it has offered to those poor people fleeing the war in Ukraine.

As part to the Dayton agreement, Croatia plays an important role in maintaining peace and stability. We are also grateful to Slovenia for its long-standing support for peace, as demonstrated during its recent EU presidency. Sir Stuart Peach has been mentioned by a number of hon. Members, and I am very pleased that he has been appointed the special envoy to the western Balkans. With his characteristic alacrity, he has already visited all the countries in the region since his appointment in December last year. I had the opportunity to meet him when the heads of Government for the western Balkans

[James Cleverly]

visited the UK. I have no doubt we will continue to liaise closely as the Minister and envoy, respectively. He recently discussed the dialogues with political leaders in Serbia and Kosovo. He is maintaining close contacts with our partners in the US and in Europe as we work together to pursue an agreement.

It is essential to ensure the security and defence of all our allies that we continue to work in close co-ordination. What happens in the Balkans affects the whole of Europe. We have a long-standing interest in the security of the region, and we will continue to work to protect that. We will do so by contributing to peace support operations, strengthening democratic institutions, combating organised crime and corruption and promoting international justice. That includes UK personnel supporting KFOR, the Kosovo Force. Our UK military training hub is active in North Macedonia for the whole region. From April, we will finance a new international security program to boost resilience across the western Balkans to defend against cyber-attacks and disinformation.

Economic opportunities also play a crucial role in supporting stability. Co-operation and trade are increasing between the UK and the whole region, and that benefits us and the region enormously. They will help to create jobs, improve quality of life and reduce emigration and the loss of talent that, sadly, a number of countries in the region have experienced. We are building on the partnership trade and co-operation and agreement that we signed with Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia. Energy diversification will improve the region's energy security, help to deliver on our climate objectives and help to provide liberation from a reliance on Russian gas supplies. We have quadrupled the UK's export finance availability to the region to support that.

Politically and diplomatically, the UK remains at the forefront of efforts to stop destabilising activities in the

Balkans, especially those supported by Russia. We are working hand in hand with partners in the region and our allies more broadly.

Wayne David: On that point, some have suggested that Turkey has a crucial role to play in the area. Turkey is well respected by Bosniak Muslims, for example, but it also has significant investments in Serbia and Republika Srpska. Turkey might therefore be well placed to play a significant role in helping to stabilise the situation. I wondered if the Minister has any views on that opinion.

James Cleverly: Turkey is a significant country in the near neighbourhood of the western Balkans. It is a NATO ally. I enjoy a good relationship with my opposite number in the Turkish Government, and I have a call scheduled with him in the near future. I have no doubt that maintaining the stability in the western Balkans will be one of the things that we discuss. We will continue to work hand in hand with our partners and allies to promote and maintain peace, security and prosperity for the people of the western Balkans.

10.45 am

Wayne David: This has been an important debate. We are all focused on the terrible situation in Ukraine, but I think it is also extremely important that we cast our minds towards developments closer to home. I hope this very important debate will not be a one-off but will lead to others on the Floor of the House. It is important that we maintain the dialogue that exists among Members of all parties to ensure that this Parliament speaks with one strong voice.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the maintenance of peace and stability in the Balkans.

10.46 am

Sitting suspended.

South East Strategic Reservoir Option

11 am

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I will call Layla Moran to move the motion, and I will then call the Minister to respond. As is the convention for a 30-minute debate, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the proposed South East Strategic Reservoir Option.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I am very grateful to be able to bring back to the House the issue of what is actually called the Abingdon reservoir, in common parlance. At the outset, I thank all the local campaigners who have been fighting alongside me on this issue, including Derek Stork and all the members of the Group Against Reservoir Development, Councillors Sally Povolotsky and Richard Webber, and local campaigner Richard Benwell. I also thank Thames Water and Sarah Bentley, whose team have engaged with my office on this issue on a number of occasions.

The last time I was here in Westminster Hall to speak about this issue was in December 2018, in a debate called by the former Member for Wantage, the now Lord Vaizey. Three and a half years later, here we are again. In fact, many campaigners are telling me that the campaign already feels like groundhog day, because the proposed Abingdon reservoir has been looming on the horizon for the people of South Oxfordshire for the best part of 25 years. In 2010, community campaigners were successful, as the Planning Inspectorate determined that there was “no immediate need” for a reservoir of this scale. In 2018, following the Westminster Hall debate, we defeated the monstrous project again. This debate is especially timely, because the public consultation on the regional plan put together by Water Resources South East closed on Monday. It is fair to say that the proposal has mobilised the community, with one constituent writing to me to say that

“these plans are frankly scary and have prompted me to try and take some action.”

It is important to make it clear that I fully accept that continuing to meet rising water demand is of utmost importance. Those in the industry refer to the point at which demand outweighs supply as “the jaws of death”, and I have no desire to find out what that means. They are warning, however, that we are on this path and that something needs to happen—on that, let us agree. Climate change means there is a reduction in water supply, and population growth will continue to increase demand. There is clearly a gap in supply and a growing need for drought resilience. I therefore understand the drive to plan for the worst but hope for the best.

Water Resources South East, which is an alliance of six water companies in the south-east of England, has a proposal to fill the gap: the Abingdon reservoir. For those who may be less familiar with the project, let me paint a picture. The Abingdon reservoir is a fully bunded—that means walled—raw water storage reservoir in the upper Thames catchment area. It is near the villages of Drayton, Steventon and The Hannes, but it also affects Garford, Frilford and Marcham. During periods of

high flow, water would be taken out of the Thames and pumped into the reservoir. When flow in the Thames is low and the water is required in London and the rest of the south-east, water would be released to the Thames in order to be taken out further downstream.

It sounds good, but it is worth noting that this not just a reservoir. It is a mega-reservoir. It would be the largest walled reservoir in the UK and hold 150 megatonnes of water, with a footprint of seven square kilometres—that is ever so slightly smaller than Abingdon itself. The entire city of Swindon—by which I mean every person, car and house—weighs five times less than the water that would be contained in the reservoir. Its concrete walls would be between 15 and 25 metres high—equivalent to three double-decker buses stacked on top of one another—and all of this would be built on a floodplain in the River Thames, in an area that was heavily affected by flooding in 2007.

It is understandable that my constituents are concerned, first, about the disruption that will be caused by eight to 10 years of construction and, secondly, about all the local infrastructure that will be put under water. Local people may draw a comparison between this reservoir and the Farmoor reservoir. The Farmoor reservoir’s walls are only 1 metre to 2 metres high and it is about a third of the size. People can sail on Farmoor; we certainly will not be able to sail on this one, and nor is it going to be a nature reserve. This reservoir will cost the taxpayer billions of pounds and will have a huge environmental impact. In my view and that of the campaigners, it is imperative that Water Resources South East does due diligence and reassures the public, at this early stage, that the proposal is absolutely necessary. That reassurance is wholly lacking at the moment.

My constituents are challenging some key assumptions. A cornerstone of the argument for the reservoir is population growth. WRSE predicts a population increase of 4 million by 2060. The Office for National Statistics puts the figure at 1.13 million, less than a third of that prediction. Water companies have pointed to growth in the Oxford to Cambridge corridor as a factor in their need to create extra resources, but the Oxford-Cambridge Arc appears to have been scrapped. Which number is it? Overestimating population growth has a huge impact on planning for future water demand. The WRSE estimate overstates the required water output by 150 million litres a day.

The case for an infrastructure project of this size should have no holes, but one appears to be leaking already, and it is not the only issue. If the project were to go ahead, the impact on the environment would be monumental. The submission to the Regulators Alliance for Progressing Infrastructure Development—RAPID—claims that the reservoir would have a moderate adverse environmental impact but that the plan would increase biodiversity by 10%. How can the report make such claims, when the initial environmental impact assessment scoping studies will not be carried out until gate three? We have just passed gate one. That will be in spring 2023, with construction due to begin in 2025.

An initial background environmental impact assessment was conducted by Thames Water. When it was released—under pressure—it was almost entirely redacted. That is simply not good enough. Campaign groups have raised concerns that there will be a total loss of habitat and biodiversity. The size and depth of the reservoir will be

[Layla Moran]

unsuitable for nesting waterfowl, and it is highly unlikely that species pushed out during construction will ever return. The project will also have the largest construction carbon footprint of any strategic water project, which we know from Thames Water's own figures. Thames Water has refused to give any breakdown of the figures in the gate one review.

If the requirement for the project seems in doubt, and the consequences for the local area are so catastrophic, but we accept that there is a problem, it is fair to ask whether there are alternatives. The short answer is yes. The reservoir is one of many strategic resource options open to water companies. There are the Severn Thames transfer, Grand Union Canal transfer and London effluent reuse schemes, desalination schemes and, of course, important leakage reduction measures and water demand reduction.

In its submission to the regulator, to which Thames Water contributed, companies argued that the proposal to link the Severn Thames transfer scheme to the Abingdon reservoir via a pipeline would have “no material...benefit”, but in conversations with my office, Thames Water has said that the Severn Thames transfer depends on the reservoir, as the River Thames does not have the storage capacity for the additional water. Both things cannot be true at the same time. What are they telling us? Why is what they are telling us different to what they have submitted?

Local campaign groups further argue that the Thames does not in fact store the water transferred from the Severn, but that the water simply flows down the river and then gets extracted elsewhere. There is no point in supplying the water from the Severn and pumping it to the Abingdon reservoir, because it can be extracted and stored locally, where it is needed. The common misconception about all these schemes is that they will be supplying large amounts of water all time. That is not true: for the majority of the year, neither scheme would supply more than a trickle flow to keep the pipes clean. When there is a likelihood of shortages, developing schemes will be called on to put water into the Thames, and even then, it will not necessarily be at the maximum rate. The point is that the two schemes are, to a large extent, interchangeable. The Severn Thames transfer is, however, more flexible and more adaptable. It will be delivered earlier at a lower cost and a lower construction carbon footprint. It takes up less land and leaves workings underground, not threatening surrounding villages.

As the justification for the reservoir looks flawed and there appears to be a better alternative, we have to ask how we have ended up debating this proposal yet again. One answer lies in the make-up of Water Resource South East, which is a body of six water companies—that is, six organisations interested in maximising their profits. Thames Water pay-outs in dividends to shareholders of parent companies amounted to £57 billion between 1991 and 2019, nearly half the sum it has spent on maintaining and improving the country's pipes and treatment plants over that period. With Thames Water's record of pumping sewage into our rivers and failing to fix leakage problems, how are customers expected to trust it to deliver this new infrastructure project? Water companies in the south-east of England appear to have free rein to implement these plans and projects, with little public scrutiny or engagement. Moreover, they are

operating under a veil of secrecy, with one quango being under a non-disclosure agreement to another for a scheme that uses public money. That is surely not right, and when an organisation is permitted to operate in this way, it is unsurprising that an element of group-think pervades it.

However, there is another model. Water Resource East has board members not just from the water companies, but from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, local councils and the Rivers Trust. Engaging local stakeholders at all levels of the organisation is the way to maximise local engagement and improve planning, rather than box-ticking exercises and cursory public consultations.

My constituents' feeling on this issue runs deep, and it is a campaign that some have been fighting for nearly a lifetime. I therefore urge the Minister to thoroughly interrogate the proposal for this reservoir, especially as the Secretary of State has sign-off for the regional plan in spring 2023. I ask her to look again at the population estimates, ensure sufficient environmental impact analysis, reconsider the structure of Water Resource South East, and make it clear to Thames Water through a written warning that releasing wholly redacted environmental studies is simply unacceptable. As the plan for the reservoir progresses to gate two, £29.8 million of taxpayers' money has been committed to further feasibility studies. We have been here before, and millions of pounds and copious amounts of time were spent fighting it. All I ask is that before we go around this merry-go-round again, we pause, reflect, properly consult, and make sure every available option is considered fully and transparently.

11.13 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on securing the debate. I realise that she had a similar debate in the past; I was not Environment Minister then, but I have looked at the transcript—it was in 2019, wasn't it?

I think we are all agreed that water is the most basic, yet vital, resource. It is needed for everything we do and is essential for a healthy environment and a prosperous economy. A reliable water supply should not be taken for granted. I say that because we have not experienced significant shortages of water countrywide since the 1970s, although in April 2012, following two dry winters and just weeks before the London Olympics, water availability in the south-east was reaching record lows. We only avoided significant shortages thanks to a very wet summer in 2012, which highlights how important our water supply is. We have to consider not only a growing population but the effects of climate change, especially in drier parts of the country where it is causing increasing challenges to our water supply. Water companies have to take account of those factors in their future planning in order to provide a reliable and sustainable supply of drinking water. It is our job in Government to work with the water regulators to ensure that the water companies do their job effectively.

The Environment Agency's national framework for water resources, published in 2020, identified that between 2025 and 2050 about 3 billion to 4 billion extra litres of

water a day will be needed for the public water supply—that might surprise a lot of people. We must therefore take a strategic approach to future water needs and work with regional groups and water companies to take account of climate change while protecting the environment. We want to preserve our iconic valleys and water bodies such as chalk streams. Indeed, we welcomed the Catchment Based Approach's chalk stream strategy, published in October 2021.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has worked closely with our chalk stream restoration group on its development and to drive forward a future vision for chalk streams. I do not know whether the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon engaged with any of that, but some of her neighbours did, and a lot of people, myself included, want to re-establish and restore our amazing chalk streams. That includes having to reduce unsustainable water abstraction from chalk streams and aquifers. We have measures in the landmark Environment Act 2021 to do just that.

The EA's national framework also reflects the Government's commitment to a twin-track approach to improving water resilience by investing in new supply infrastructure where necessary. Leakage will be tackled by our water companies as they crack down on water wastage. Up to two thirds of our additional water needs can be made up by water demand improvement. By 2050, we expect to see leakage levels halved and average per capita consumption at 110 litres per person—more than 30 litres less than we currently use in our homes. We are consulting on legally binding demand management targets under our new powers in the Environment Act. The issue is so critical that we are looking at it from every angle.

We must expect all water companies, including Thames Water and Affinity Water, to act on customers' needs for a resilient water supply, as well as to manage the pressures. I hope that the hon. Member will appreciate that collaborative regional water resources groups, including Water Resources East, which she mentioned, have been consulting on their emerging plans—that consultation closed yesterday—and will publicly consult again to improve them. That will be used to inform water companies' draft statutory water resources management plans, which will require further public consultation at the end of the year. There will be opportunities for her to feed into that.

Layla Moran: I gave Water Resources East as the example of best practice because it has the councils, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Rivers Trust sitting on the board, as opposed to their being simply consultees. Does the Minister agree that that is a better model? Local accountability feeds into the plans at the highest level, as opposed to in the Water Resources South East model, which does not include any local democracy whatsoever.

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Lady makes a valid point. We expect water companies to work with their local authorities. She touched on the point about population in her speech. That is where working with the local authority on its local growth plans is valuable, because the local authority will be aware of what new housing there will be and how the population will expand in its area. On those grounds, water companies need to plan for sustainable growth, which is very important.

There will be an opportunity to feed into the management plans. The reservoir would be in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston), so I urge him to get involved. He was vociferous about the need for transparency in the process, as is the hon. Lady. He stresses the importance of making sure that there is a need for the reservoir. He would have spoken in the debate, but he has covid, so we wish him well. Perhaps he is at home listening.

The consultations will help inform future decisions on the right way to secure water supplies, including for Thames Water's 10 million and Affinity Water's 3.6 million customers. To support the robustness of water resources planning, as well as the national framework, the water regulators issue detailed guidance to water companies on their water resources plans. If water companies forecast a water supply deficit—as we will see in the south-east—they should study all the available options fully to justify the preferred solutions in their plans.

The Environment Agency and Ofwat have both helped to shape the regional plans and are statutory consultees on the water resources management plans. The EA's national framework sets out that regional groups must be strategic in planning their water needs. There needs to be more effective collaboration between water companies to manage the supply and demand, the resilience and, indeed, the environment, all of which have been clearly flagged. The Environment Agency also advises the Secretary of State on the draft plan before it can be finalised following consultation, so there is a set and clear process.

Water companies are also using the £469 million made available by Ofwat in this price review period properly to investigate a range of potential strategic water resources options, such as new reservoirs, big reservoirs, small on-farm reservoirs—which we potentially need more of—water recycling projects and inter-regional water transfers. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon criticised the use of money for investigation, but I would argue that it is critical to know that the right projects are being focused on.

As the hon. Lady mentioned, the work is supported by RAPID, or the Regulators' Alliance for Progressing Infrastructure Development, a joint team made up of the three water regulators: Ofwat, the EA and the Drinking Water Inspectorate. It is working with industry on the development of strategic water resources infrastructure that is in the best interests of water users and the environment to inform water company plans. She is absolutely right that a range of schemes are being very closely looked at. It is possible that a combination of these big national infrastructure projects will be needed, and options such as the Severn-Thames transfer and the reservoir are not necessarily mutually exclusive. All of that will come out through the consultations, the investigation and the data.

Recently, I went to visit an enormous pipe that goes from the Humber, where there is a lot of water, right down to Essex. That pipe is one example of the huge water transfer projects necessary because of the critical water situation in the east of the country. The planning for that huge project was put in place some years ago, so that the investment could be made and the project could get under way. I am sure that the hon. Member will not disagree that such projects will be necessary in the future.

[*Rebecca Pow*]

I agree with the hon. Lady that we need robust plans and transparency but we do have a system to enable that. The need for new infrastructure is, again, set out in the draft national policy statement for water resources infrastructure under the Planning Act 2008. The statement applies to nationally significant infrastructure projects, and I would expect the proposed reservoir scheme to qualify as one such project. I can assure her that extensive pre-application consultation and engagement must be undertaken by applicants using the Planning Act 2008.

Layla Moran: The Minister mentioned transparency, but there is a real issue with the redacted environmental impact assessment. I say “redacted”, but the document is gobbledegook and I cannot make head or tail of it. The water company would get much further if it took a much more constructive approach to local campaigners, so that they could be reassured that their numbers were right. Does the Minister agree that the company ought to release the unredacted paper so that we can look at it?

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, but I did hear her at the beginning of her speech praising her relationship with Thames Water, so she could use that relationship to urge it to do just that. We are still consulting and there is a long way to go in the process.

I want to touch on a couple of points about the carbon impact. The hon. Lady obviously made a good point when she said that if the project went ahead it

would be huge, but regional groups and water companies have to show how their overall contribution to the sector’s 2030 net zero commitment would line up, and how it would line up with the Government’s targets and our net zero commitment. All our big infrastructure projects have to take those things into consideration.

Similarly, on the environmental impact, the water companies will have to continue to develop their proposals and their evidence surrounding any kind of footprint on the environment and habitats, and on the requirements for biodiversity net gain. As nature recovery Minister, I would certainly want everything possible to be done in any scheme that came forward to add to the sum total of our nature recovery.

I hope that the hon. Lady and my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage, who potentially is joining us from his sick bed, see that there is a robust process in place, which is critical. The other critical thing is that we must provide the nation with a reliable source of water. The solutions that are finally selected must go through the right due process and we must know that they are the right system for the right purposes.

I thank the hon. Lady for introducing the debate, and I thank you, too, Mr Bone.

Question put and agreed to.

11.26 am

Sitting suspended.

In-work Poverty

[CHRISTINA REES *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered in-work poverty.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. Before I start, I want to pass on our best wishes, from all sides of the House, to the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), who I am sorry to hear has covid. I am sure that her colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), will do an admirable job in her place.

Work should always be a pathway and route out of poverty. The fact that the phrase “in-work poverty” even exists is a damning indictment of successive Conservative Government policies over the past 12 years. The Government are clearly making life harder for working people, as I will illustrate with a number of examples. I am conscious that a large number of Members want to participate in this important debate, so I will truncate my remarks, but I want to illustrate my argument with some examples from a number of sectors.

Clearly, one of the issues is the increase in taxes and national insurance, which is in direct contravention of a commitment that the Conservatives made in their last general election manifesto. We are also having to deal with the problem of the huge increases in energy prices that the Government, via Ofgem, have allowed to take place. Members may recall that I had a question for the Prime Minister last Wednesday in order to contrast the position of the French Government, who have capped energy price rises at 4%, with that of our Government, who have capped energy price rises at an incredible 54%. That has had a huge impact on people who are in work.

Fuel poverty, food poverty, energy poverty, housing poverty and child poverty are all measures of economic failure, and they are all on the increase. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, one in eight workers are struggling to make ends meet. If work guaranteed a decent standard of living, the UK would be going through a golden age of prosperity. Instead, the Conservative party has delivered successive year-on-year policies of austerity over a decade. The social security safety net has given way, after a decade of wear and tear.

Without the most basic protection, a decade of pay cuts and wage stagnation has left working families ill prepared. Many have no savings at all, and people certainly have far less resilience to cope with the current cost of living crisis. In the workplace, we have seen employment rights deliberately weakened, a dramatic increase in the number of zero-hours contracts, and an expansion of the gig economy, with a growing proportion of working people in insecure employment.

I also want to mention the appalling employment practices. Poor employment practices, such as fire and rehire, are rife, even with very profitable and long-established companies, some of which are household names. Despite recent and repeated assurances from Ministers at the Dispatch Box—often condemning the practice—they have done nothing to outlaw the practice of fire and

rehire by rogue employers. The Government have disregarded the interests of working people and dismissed the private Member's Bill brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner).

The key workers we all clapped for and honoured during lockdown are bearing the brunt of our low-wage, poverty-pay economy. Figures produced by the TUC reveal that 43% of north-east key workers—over 173,000 people—earn below £10 an hour. Personally, I do not think that £15 an hour is an unreasonable ask in this day and age.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank my honourable comrade for giving way. Is he as surprised as I am at a recent article, published by *The Herald* newspaper and The Ferret website, showing that 20% of jobs advertised on the Department for Work and Pensions website paid under the national minimum wage rate of £9.50? The Department really needs to launch an inquiry into why that is the case.

Grahame Morris: Absolutely. It should concern us all when the DWP is advertising jobs that fall below the minimum standard and even the limited protections afforded to working people.

We know that even a modest increase in the minimum wage to £10 an hour would transform the lives of key workers, including one in three care workers—so many of us applaud care workers for their contribution, particularly during the pandemic—and 173,000 childcare workers. It would raise the incomes of over half a million people.

Workers across the country are struggling to feed their families and heat their homes. I will give some examples, including one I received from the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers. Like many of us, I have met the cleaners employed by the Churchill Group who are fighting for a real living wage of £15 an hour. I will also highlight the fact that the GMB trade union is campaigning against real-terms pay cuts for nearly 150,000 ASDA staff, and the ongoing University and College Union strike in the university sector. The pattern is the same: terms, conditions, wages and pension rights are being eroded; workers who try to negotiate are blocked, ignored and blamed; while well-paid directors shrug their shoulders with uninterest, often while picking up huge bonuses.

The workers who kept our supermarket shelves stacked during the pandemic are now struggling to feed their own families. I was shown a survey by the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union, which was very illuminating; it was conducted by the union of its members, who are in the food sector. It found that between February and March 2021, 40% of those surveyed had eaten less than they should have eaten because they did not have sufficient cash; 35% had eaten less than they should have to ensure that other members of their household got a meal; and 21% relied on goods and contributions from family and friends to make ends meet. These are people who are in work—shift workers who supplied the country with bread during the pandemic.

I will also highlight the excellent Right to Food Campaign, which was mentioned in this very Chamber yesterday. The campaign was set up and promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), and it has been endorsed by my own union,

[Grahame Morris]

Unite. It seeks to make the Government responsible for addressing the raging income inequalities and the broken benefit system that have pushed so many people into a spiral of poverty.

I saw a quote on social media just before this debate and thought how relevant it is to what we are discussing, because we are talking about the cost of living crisis. The country has more than enough resources and more than enough money to keep everyone warm, housed, free from hunger and properly clothed; in fact, the country has enough wealth to do that a hundred times over. So it is not really a cost of living crisis; what we have is an inequality crisis.

I think the Government should scrap some of the provisions that currently apply to those in receipt of universal credit. Let us not forget that a substantial number of those in receipt of universal credit are in work—they are the working poor. The five-week wait before they can receive a penny is a major contributing factor to the huge increase in the number of people having to turn to food banks.

We need to start putting people before profits. Sadly—it is lamentable, really—poverty has become the norm in Britain; it has become normalised. Yards away from where we are having this debate, homeless people are freezing on the streets and sleeping rough for want of a home. Children go hungry. We see Members of Parliament, particularly Members of the Conservative party, posing for photographs at food banks, and I think the irony must be lost on them that those food banks exist only because of the policies that this Government have promoted.

To return to energy prices, the French Government have capped cost rises at 4%, Germany has cut tariffs and Spain has introduced a windfall tax on the energy companies. But here in Britain, standing charges are doubling and the energy price cap will see energy bills rise by 54%—that is £700 more on average—for our families. Peterlee is the biggest town in my constituency, and EDF, one of the big six energy companies, has many customers there. It is interesting to contrast what is happening in Peterlee with what is happening in Paris. Will the Minister explain why French state-owned EDF can cap cost increases at 4% in Paris while my constituents in Peterlee face a 54% increase in their bills?

Tax rises are exacerbating the cost of living crisis as many in our nation struggle with rising prices. I happened to meet a farmer last weekend, and we chatted about a number of issues. He grows oilseed rape and wheat, and he said that the price of wheat is doubling, and that the price of fertiliser is doubling as well, which will cost him an extra £10,000 a year. He reliably informed me that the cost of wheat, which was £150 a tonne, is now £300 a tonne. That will filter through into dramatic increases in food costs for staples such as bread. The prices of many basic staples, including margarine, tomatoes and apples have increased by as much as 45% in the past year.

Figures from the Trussell Trust and the Independent Food Aid Network show that more than 3 million food bank parcels were distributed in 2020-21. I tried to get the figures for the food banks operating in my constituency—at the community centre in Dawdon and at the East Durham Trust in Peterlee—but they are not part of the

Trussell Trust, so the excellent work that they do is not included in those statistics, meaning that the figure is even bigger.

Average petrol and diesel prices are £1.61 and £1.73 per litre respectively, but regional public transport is expensive and unreliable after a decade of neglect, meaning that families have no alternative to protect against increasing fuel costs. The energy cap is up at 54%, and further increases are in the pipeline. The Conservative party once promised to be the “greenest government ever”, but the Public Accounts Committee recently described the green homes grant as a “slam dunk fail”.

House prices are rising beyond the reach of first-time buyers; sky-high rental costs leave little at the end of the month for deposits and savings; and we as a country have abandoned council housing, which is quite disgraceful—that social housing delivered low-cost homes for the post-war generation.

Nelson Mandela said:

“poverty...is man-made and can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings... Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life... While poverty persists, there is no true freedom.”

Once again, we see that poverty is a political choice. It is a Conservative political choice, and one that this Government should be ashamed of.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Christina Rees (in the Chair): Order. The debate is well subscribed, so I am putting in place a formal time limit of four minutes. I call Peter Gibson.

2.44 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I congratulate my County Durham colleague, the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), on securing the debate. He called for a 58% increase in the minimum wage, which would have a massive inflationary impact. He cannot complain about inflation and the cost of living crisis that we face while advocating policies that would create further problems. If levelling up is to succeed, we must tackle poverty. I want to make it clear that I believe that one person or family in poverty is one too many.

As we all know, employment is the best route out of poverty. Evidence shows that full-time work substantially reduces the chances of living in poverty, and I am proud that the Government have taken an approach to tackling poverty that has employment at its heart. We have seen the Government accept the four recommendations of the Low Pay Commission, which will see the living wage increase to £9.50 an hour—an increase of 6.6%. We have seen the Government extend the national living wage to 23 and 24-year-olds, who will also benefit from the increase to £9.50. Improvements have been made for those on universal credit and in work, with an increase in the work allowance and a reduction in the taper rate, making work pay. Across the country, we have seen massive improvements in our pension savings for working people, with auto-enrolment securing a pension income for millions. I am hopeful that this can be extended to younger people and those working part time, to help ensure that they save for their futures too.

I appreciate that some people do not have the skills to get the job that they want, including those who left school at an early stage and those who have caring responsibilities. That is why the Government's lifetime skills guarantee is designed to transform the adult education system, helping people of all ages to develop the skills that they need to get better jobs and supporting businesses to find or develop talents to fill the skills gap. Last week, I visited the marvellous Darlington College and saw with my own eyes the incredible learning and training opportunities on offer, from plumbing, plastering and public service to catering, car repairs and childcare. As T-levels will be introduced later this year, the college also offers courses in robotics. These are incredible opportunities to learn and improve skills for the economy of the future.

We know that our economy has record vacancies. From ambulance, bus and taxi drivers to doctors and nurses, we know that there are opportunities out there. The simple law of economics means that wages are increasing in order to attract people into these roles. We help our constituents in the long run by ensuring that they have the chances to improve their skills and employability. I hope that one day we reach a point where wages from employment provide enough, so that in-work benefits are not necessary. In the meantime, however, I believe that increasing wages, reducing the amount taken from those on benefits who work, and giving people the chance to learn in order to improve their lot is the best way to tackle the issues raised in today's debate. I look forward to the Minister's response and to hearing an update on the cross-departmental mechanism on in-work progression.

2.47 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The cost of living crisis is biting deep into the lives of my constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran. In-work poverty ought to be a contradiction in terms, but it is at an all-time high. Two thirds of working-age adults in poverty live in households where an adult is working, and 75% of children in poverty live in a home where at least one person is working, which shows that work offers no guaranteed route out of poverty. In-work benefits, such as universal credit, are simply not enough to lift people out of poverty, and cutting the universal credit uplift and the working tax credit of £20 a week was not just folly on the part of the Government; it was also cruel in the extreme, because it was done in the full knowledge of the hardship it would cause.

Despite the doubling of the Scottish child payment, the universal credit uplift cut has caused untold hardship in our communities. What can the Government do? They need to raise the statutory minimum wage in line with the real living wage, and they need to remove the age discrimination that it inherently contains. They need to understand that increasing the national minimum wage to £9.50 per hour next month is simply not enough to compensate the people who are suffering because of soaring costs in every direction, and it does not compensate them for the £20 cut in universal credit that they have already suffered.

The Government could ditch the national insurance tax rise, which is set to kick in next month and will disproportionately hit those in the lowest-paid jobs. They could increase statutory sick pay—we have one of

the lowest sick pay rates in the OECD. Even so, one in five workers are simply not eligible for it, which, again, disproportionately impacts on women. They could support my Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill, because we know that beyond the emotional impact of bereavement, there are significant financial costs as well, without the bereaved having to worry about lost earnings. They could reverse the £20 per week universal credit cut immediately and abolish the electricity standing charge, which amounts to about a quarter of consumer energy bills for the less well off.

We all understand that global fuel prices are increasing, but motorists pay 58p per litre on fuel duty and then additionally pay 12p in VAT on that charge, so around 70p per litre of petrol goes straight to the Treasury in tax. As fuel hits £1.80 per litre, the UK Government must cut the tax take on fuel, as it does not just hit motorists who rely on their cars to get to work, but adds to business costs and impacts the whole economy, and increases the costs of goods and services. Cutting the tax on fuel could help prevent inflation reaching double figures. It makes complete sense to do that at this time.

The scandal of in-work poverty cannot be simply tolerated. The current cost of living crisis demands direct and urgent Government intervention right now, to support those in work who are no longer even just about managing—the group that the Government say they care about. The Government must respond to the needs and demands of those they purport to serve. I hope the Minister will not simply regurgitate what has already been done, because what has already been done is simply not enough in the face of a cost of living crisis that grows by the day. I hope he will be able to give us some hope that in the spring statement there will be a prospect of some respite for people across the UK, and for my constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran.

2.51 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this debate. Although we might disagree on the ways of tackling poverty, I think we all agree on the need to do so.

I want to start by defining what I mean by in-work poverty. It is important that when we talk about poverty we use the correct definitions. The Work and Pensions Committee's report on children in poverty goes into different definitions and how they are used and misused. I will use the standard definition of relative poverty. Many have focused on financial poverty, but I do not think that is the best definition. I prefer multi-modal models because I think poverty is about more than just money. It is also about educational and societal resources, but this debate has very much veered into the financial side.

On the financial side we look at inputs and outputs. Inputs are about wages, benefits and benefits top-ups, and outputs are about living costs. I want to focus on the outputs and what I call the two big beasts, which I have been campaigning on for some time—affordable housing and childcare. For affordable housing we need to sort out affordable rents. It horrifies me that in my constituency the No. 1 cause of someone being at risk of homelessness remains affordable rents, which we need to get sorted and fixed.

[Dr Ben Spencer]

Childcare is also a particular challenge in terms of a big beast. It costs a lot. It is difficult for people to administer, particularly the requirement to pay up-front costs and then claim retrospectively when one is on benefits, as opposed to directly invoicing the Department for Work and Pensions. The 85% cap for people on benefits is not enough to cover childcare costs for many people. For those in receipt of 15 to 30 hours' free childcare, certainly if they live in my constituency, lots of childcare providers require top-ups, so the idea that it is 15 to 30 hours of free childcare is illusory. Many people need financial top-ups over and above that provision. The provision is very generous, but it could be more generous still.

Childcare is also a barrier to in-work progression. Lots of people who work part time face childcare costs. When they want to increase their hours, there is a diminishing return in terms of the taper. I welcome the reduction of a taper in terms of UC payback, but that on top of increasing childcare means that when someone moves from 36 to 40 hours a week, they see relatively little return for the extra hours of work. That acts as a substantial disincentive; we need to look carefully at how we can support people who want to work—and make sure that work always pays.

Besides cost, availability of childcare is a huge problem; it remains a disincentive to work for people who are not on the breadline. I speak to lots of people on the doorstep who tell me about the challenges of childcare provision and costs when returning to work—people previously in quite high-flying careers. There are some areas where we can fix that. We can look at ratios of childminders to children. We can look at increasing school hours; I would support a move to a more continental model around that. Reducing the cap on benefits and providing more childcare support for people who are on benefits is another area we can look at.

2.56 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Rees. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this important debate. This debate takes place in the context of a sustained attack on the living standards of ordinary people in this country. Energy bills are rocketing. There are tax rises and real-terms pay cuts for millions of people, as well as cuts to universal credit, benefits and pensions. That does not happen in a vacuum; it comes after a decade of austerity, cuts to public services and the tightest squeeze on wages in 200 years. Experts warn that this could be the biggest drop in living standards in many decades.

What does that mean in reality? The daily reality of this crisis for families in my constituency of Leeds East and throughout the country is grim. How, in the fifth-biggest economy on Earth, can we have families who cannot turn the heating on? How, in the fifth-biggest economy on Earth, can we have a situation where parents are missing meals to make sure that their children can eat? How, in the fifth-biggest economy on Earth, do we have more food banks than branches of McDonald's? I recently met staff at the Chapeltown Citizens Advice in Leeds; their data shows that already, more than one in seven people in my constituency cannot pay their energy bills without cutting back on essential spending.

At the same time, the richest are getting richer. While millions suffer, the millionaires are doing very well. British billionaires have increased their wealth by £290 million per day. The Government have been slashing the taxes of bankers and the gas and oil giants that make £900 profit every single second. Let us be clear: the right to be warm is more important than the right to make super-profits. It is a rigged economic system, which is failing ordinary people. It is a crisis made in Downing Street—let us not be scared to say that.

The Government are trying to shift the blame; they are trying to say that the cost of living crisis is due to the horrific war on Ukraine. It is not. The Government's plan is to make working people pay the costs of the pandemic, just like they made ordinary people pay for the bankers' crisis. Poverty is a political choice, and the Tories are choosing to push people into poverty through the cost of living crisis.

What do we do about it? We need an emergency plan to tackle the situation. I will make five suggestions. First, the Government must scrap the national insurance hike that is coming in next month and replace it with a wealth tax on the richest 1%. Secondly, we need a windfall tax on energy profits, to be immediately used to lower energy bills, and a huge home insulation programme to save people hundreds of pounds a year. Thirdly, we need a national minimum wage of £15 per hour. Fourthly, we need the restoration of the universal credit uplift, and its expansion to those who are denied it. We need to uplift benefits by the 8% that the Resolution Foundation and others are calling for to meet inflation pressures. Finally, we need to tackle child hunger, with free school meals for all schoolchildren—learning from what Labour is doing in power in Wales.

We cannot allow the Government to yet again force working people to pay for a crisis. They have made a political choice; our political choice is to fight back with a set of proposals that will make a real difference.

2.59 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Ms Rees. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this incredibly important debate.

Poverty is a scourge that devastates lives. In today's debate we are focusing on in-work poverty, but the Government should address poverty however it arises. A report by the Institute for Public Policy Research in May 2021 highlighted that the UK's poverty rate among working households was at a record high this century. The report also found that in 2019-20 the majority of those living in poverty were in households that had some form of paid work.

That is also reflected in the Government's statistics, which show that of all the working-age adults in poverty, both in the UK and in the north-west, 65% are in working families. In some areas, the figure is even higher. For the east of England, that is 70%, and for the south-west, 72%. That is truly shocking, and completely dispels the Conservative myth that work is the best route out of poverty. I am so disappointed that we have already heard that myth chanted today.

Peter Gibson: If work is not the route out of poverty, what is?

Margaret Greenwood: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. We have just listened as my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burdon) came out with all sorts of suggestions, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Easington—such as increasing the minimum wage, tackling insecure work, banning zero-hours contracts and so on. I will return in my speech to the issue that the hon. Gentleman raised.

As I said, those figures completely dispel the Conservative myth that work is the best route out of poverty. It is clear that low-income households are likely to be disproportionately affected by the cost of living crisis. The Trussell Trust has warned that, for people already struggling to afford the essentials, the cost of living crisis can mean parents going without meals in order to afford to feed their children. That, sadly, is nothing new, but the situation, instead of improving, is getting worse.

Food prices have been increasing since the middle of 2021 and are expected to increase in coming months. The domestic energy price cap will increase by 54% from 1 April for approximately 22 million customers. Energy prices are likely to continue to rise beyond that, as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Some economists have suggested that the inflation rate in the UK could hit 10%.

Peter Gibson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Margaret Greenwood: I have given way once and am short of time; I am sorry. The increase in national insurance contributions from next month, opposed by Labour, will increase the pressure on working people and businesses even further.

The full impact of the coronavirus pandemic on levels of poverty is not yet known, but early analysis suggests that poverty will increase over the next few years, and that low-income households are particularly vulnerable to the economic effects of the pandemic. The Government must end the scourge of in-work poverty, by tackling the structural causes of poverty and inequality, such as low pay and high living costs. At next week's spring statement, the Government have a chance to make a real difference to the lives of working families. There are plenty of steps they could take.

The Government should never have cut universal credit by more than £1,000 a year, and they should reinstate the uplift. They should also scrap the two-child limit, which the Child Poverty Action Group has called for, and the benefit cap. They should increase child benefit by £10 a week, and call a halt to the rise in national insurance. They should also initiate a one-off windfall tax on oil and gas producers, to cut household energy bills by up to £600, as Labour has called for.

Those are all measures that this Conservative Government could take; it is simply a matter of political will. I ask the Minister to set out today what action the Government will take to eradicate poverty.

3.3 pm

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. Ms Rees. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for securing the debate and for his comments.

In-work poverty undermines the social contract that evolved in this country after world war two with the establishment of the welfare state. The whole purpose

of Beveridge was that people would work and pay national insurance, which would provide for their sickness and retirement. Those who fell through the gap would be dealt with by supplementary benefit. Work was the route out of poverty. That is no longer the situation.

We now have in-work poverty, as others have said—something that is unprecedented in recent times. That is not an accident; it is an economic model that has come from the United States. It was brought in—established perhaps—by Clinton. For those who have not read it, I recommend the book by Barbara Ehrenreich, “Nickel and Dimed”. She refers to the United States that came into being after the reforms brought in by Bill Clinton in 1996 with the Welfare Reform Act. That created a low-wage economy. It might have created many jobs, and Clinton dined out on that for a long time, until people began to drill down into what was actually happening. It was a low-wage economy. Ehrenreich talks about people having to do one, two or three jobs simply to survive—not to pay medical bills or school fees, but simply to live—because the cost of living made it impossible. We perceived that to be a problem for people in the United States, which did not have a welfare state, and that it would not apply here. We still have a welfare state, but it is beginning to fall apart—not just fraying at the seams, but being eroded, corroded and, indeed, torn down from within.

The whole concept of work being a route out of poverty no longer applies. That simply is not the case, as we can see all about us. It is not simply about the statistics that have been mentioned; we are conscious of other aspects. The problem hits every corner of this country and applies to every sector. The movie “Sorry We Missed You” highlights how the issue affects social care and distribution, but there is hardly a sector that is not affected.

The problem is not restricted simply to those who work on zero-hour contracts because, as in the United States, we now have people who cannot live on the hours they get in one job; they have to do two or three jobs simply to survive, and we have to make sure that that changes. It is simply unacceptable, and a breach of the social contract that was supposed to be the benefit of world war two.

We still see risks, so what can we do about them? First and foremost, we have to recognise that this was an issue even before coronavirus and the cost of living crisis. It was, as others have correctly testified, predicated on high rents. People were unable to earn enough to meet their rent, and they had to choose between paying their rent and eating. That is now compounded by a cost of living increase, especially for fuel, and inflation is hammering food costs. Now, the situation is not just about people managing to pay the rent, but deciding whether they can heat their homes before even indulging in feeding themselves and their children. Society has to change, but how can we do it?

Fundamentally, we must ensure first of all that we have a living wage. Our current minimum wage is not enough; it needs to be a national living wage. We need to empower trade unions, because workers are being driven right over. We must regulate, so that people can afford their rent. Finally, as we face escalating fuel costs, we need a social tariff and an end to the abomination of standing charges, which are impoverishing people. There is a better way. This is not the society that was anticipated by the generations before us.

3.7 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for securing this important debate and for his passionate speech.

More than half of those who live in poverty are in working households. Indeed, the Institute for Public Policy Research found last year that since 2010 the situation has deteriorated steadily, leaving working families at the highest risk of falling into poverty since the welfare system was at its most generous in 2004. That was before the current cost of living crisis that we face.

Now, the Government's proposed national insurance contributions increase will affect more than 2.5 million working households on low incomes, inflation is expected to hit at least 7.25% in April—pushing food and everyday costs through the roof—and energy prices are expected to rise by a whopping 50%. If we add the Government's proposed benefits uplift of 3.1%, which, in the light of the anticipated rates of inflation that I have just mentioned, actually amounts to a dramatic benefits cut, we have the makings of a poverty crisis the scale of which we have not seen in our lifetimes.

Things do not need to be like this. In fact, it makes no economic sense at all, because in economies where incomes are suppressed, it is not just living standards that suffer; growth is suppressed, too. I am sure that we have all heard the saying, "A rising tide should lift all boats"—as the economy expands, everybody should reap the rewards—but we cannot successfully expand the economy without two things—industrial strategy and demand. If consumers have no money to spend, there is no demand—unless we export everything we produce in the UK.

I urge the Minister to take a number of urgent actions. First, the Government must set about setting out a far more detailed and comprehensive industrial and skills strategy. Secondly, the Government must take the reins on liveable wage levels. They must reform corporate governance and industrial policies to promote healthy wage growth. They must strengthen the workforce voice and roll out sectoral collective bargaining to give working people more power in the workplace, and they should examine the concept of a universal basic income for all. Thirdly, they must introduce the long-promised renters' reform Bill, to give renters the security and protection that they deserve.

Finally, on providing support to households during the cost of living crisis, I urge the Minister to scrap the proposed NICs increase and to help struggling households on energy bills by cutting the rate of VAT for household energy bills, and levying a long overdue windfall tax on oil and gas companies to generate income. This plan should include expanding the warm home discount, significantly increasing universal credit to offset soaring inflation, and increasing public sector pay and the living wage to push further wage growth. I know that this suggestion goes against every ideological principle that the Minister probably has, but he must finally address the fact that privatisation of our energy system has failed, and acknowledge that public ownership is not just a pragmatic way to solve the energy crisis, but essential to securing our energy security.

There is much that I disagree with when I study the economic principles of Adam Smith, but I will leave the Chamber with one final quotation, which I hope the Minister will agree with:

"A man must always live by his work, and his wages must at least be sufficient to maintain him."

I hope that the Minister bears that in mind when he sums up, and that he will address the points that I have raised.

3.11 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing the debate.

In the course of the last few weeks, we have been speaking about issues such as the cost of living crisis and in-work poverty almost as if they are new concepts. However, it would be remiss of any of us in this House to allow that to pass without saying that the cost of living crisis and in-work poverty are not new; they are the result of 12 years of Conservative government and austerity.

Many of my constituents, particularly those in Wellhouse, raise three main points with me regularly, and I will come them in a minute. First, I want to discuss the issue of the national insurance hike, which a number of other hon. Members have mentioned. I must be one of the many people in this House who find it a bit bizarre to be told that we need to hike national insurance on the youngest and lowest earners in society, when only in 2016 a bus was going around the UK that said that if people voted for Brexit, there would be £350 million a week extra for the national health service. I find it a little bit odd that, having committed the act of economic madness that is Brexit, we now find ourselves being told that national insurance has to be hiked to pay for changes in the health system.

The national insurance hike will disproportionately hit the youngest and the lowest income earners in our society. To put that in context, particularly for my constituents back home in Scotland, that means that 20% of the pay increase for a band 5 nurse will go on the national insurance hike. We can all stand there and talk about clapping for carers and that kind of thing, but the very people who we are seeking to reward and recognise for their work during the pandemic will be clobbered by this national insurance hike.

I will raise three other issues today. First, I want to see proper statutory sick pay. If the pandemic has highlighted anything, it is that making people choose between adhering to public health guidance and having enough money to heat their homes and put food in the fridge is a nonsense. The Government will say that now is not the time to look at statutory sick pay, but I would turn that on its head: the pandemic has magnified why statutory sick pay needs to be reformed. Statutory sick pay in these islands is the equivalent of about 17% of average weekly earnings, according to the Office for National Statistics. The Government must revisit the issue.

Secondly, let me turn to the idea of removing age discrimination. The hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) talked about the living wage. Let us be clear that the living wage is a con trick. The Government talk about the living wage, but it is not a real living wage

that is set in line with the recommendations of the Living Wage Foundation, and age discrimination is baked in.

We celebrated Scottish Apprenticeship Week just last week. I do not know whether Conservative MPs are aware that an apprentice in the UK can be paid as little as £4.30 an hour. Indeed, the UK Government website states:

“An apprentice aged 21 in the first year of their apprenticeship is entitled to a minimum hourly rate of £4.30.”

I served alongside many apprentices when I was an apprentice at Glasgow City Council. Apprentices do not get a discount on their fuel when they go to the pumps, they do not get a discount on their energy bills, and they do not get a discount when they go to Asda or Aldi for their food. If the UK Government want to talk about equality and making sure that work pays, let us start by ensuring that everybody gets a fair day's pay for a fair day's work.

Finally, I want to talk briefly about the importance of childcare. The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) made a thoughtful speech. He is right to say that we can by all means provide childcare, but the universal credit childcare offer is not enough. The Government must do so much more to help people with in-work poverty, which is a stain on this society.

3.15 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I thank the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for setting the scene so well. He has a passion for the subject, as we can tell from the way he introduced the debate.

Like others, I have been contacted by countless constituents who are not only concerned about the increase in the cost of living, but struggling to make ends meet on a daily basis. It is as simple as that, unfortunately. It is important to highlight these issues and discuss what steps we can take to help working families who are in need.

It has been estimated that 14.5 million people—some 22% of the population—were in poverty in 2020. If they were in poverty in 2020, they will unfortunately be even more so today. In addition, some 11% of families where one adult is in work are in poverty. Although the cost of living and some other issues remain devolved, they have an impact on the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Consumer rates were 5.4% higher in December 2021 than they had been a year before, making the inflation rate the highest recorded since 1992.

We all know the issues that I want to focus on. I want to focus on working-class people, who are impacted the most. I am not saying that the middle class are not impacted, because they are, but the hurt and anxiety are larger for the working class. Fuel prices are up 50%, and food prices are up some 25%. Almost 60% of people in the UK are termed working class, and in Northern Ireland 220,000 working-age adults are in poverty. We have seen the prices of petrol and diesel soaring with little or no hope of a reduction, although they have stalled today. The price of heating oil has gone up, like the price of diesel or petrol for the car.

I want to make a genuine request to the Minister. The Republic of Ireland—I do not think it is the greatest country in the world, by the way, as people know—has responded to its people by reducing VAT on household energy and fuel, as a short-term measure to help constituents. Why can we not do the same? I put that very gently but very firmly to the Minister, because I think we should do something about this.

I want to highlight the problems with the child benefit cap. I am conscious that many working families feel unable to take a pay rise from their employment, because they could lose their child benefit and be worse off. That is not the Minister's responsibility, but we need to address the issue for those who juggle their wage with the child benefit cap.

The people of the United Kingdom deserve more when it comes to housing rental prices and food prices. In the Department for Communities back home, Deirdre Hargey has brought forward some support in the Northern Ireland Assembly for those on benefits at this tough time. Whenever I see that being done, I look to the Government here to do the same. My staff have taken numerous calls from those in unemployment who cannot afford the cost of living, and unfortunately there does not seem to be any answer. More must be done to support them.

What is sure is that the issue with living costs will not de-escalate any time soon. Prices are set to rise even further in April, and we cannot and must not sit idly by and watch that unfold without knowing that we have taken all steps possible and done everything practicable to combat it. I know that this is not directly in the Minister's portfolio, but it is important, and he is the man here today responding to the debate. We need to have some measures in place and take some steps in the right direction, so that we can go back to our constituents knowing that we have done our darndest for them in Westminster Hall today. I urge the Minister to ensure that all the comments are taken on board and that the devolved nations are communicated with, so that we in Northern Ireland, and in the Northern Ireland Assembly, can benefit from whatever steps are taken to try to address the issue.

3.19 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Rees. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for securing this debate, which is absolutely vital but should not be necessary in 21st-century Britain.

My constituency of Bolton South East is the 38th most deprived constituency in the United Kingdom. We have a jobs crisis, a wage crisis and a poverty crisis. Every single day, constituents write to me, outlining the most tragic circumstances. The stories include the inability to get a job, an unexpected benefits freeze and, more recently, a collective panic about how to pay for food, heating and bills. These are not the make-believe people that Cameron and Osborne dreamed up in 2010—the “shirkers” or “scroungers”—but the strivers that the coalition supposedly championed. They work long hours in tough jobs to provide for their families, put food on the table and give their children the best chance in life.

The 800 taxi drivers in the borough of Bolton are an example. Many of them live in my patch, and work long, hard hours, but because of rulings about the gig

[Yasmin Qureshi]

economy and their self-employed status, they often fail to make even the minimum wage on some shifts. We need to factor in the continuing restraints on licensing by local authorities, insurance costs, and other rules set by local authorities that make life even harder for them.

So many hard-working people are living in poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that 56% of people in poverty are working; that represents a rise of 17% from 1998. Additionally, almost 40% of people on universal credit are working. That tells us that our economic model and wage system are fundamentally broken. We are told frequently by the Government that work is the best route out of poverty, as if that is an irrefutable fact, but clearly it is not the case.

Real wages were revised down again on Tuesday and are collectively lower than at the height of the financial crisis in 2008, yet the pay of chief executives of big companies has ballooned. The rich have actually got richer over the years. House prices are up by 150% in some areas of Bolton. Of course, there is also the rise in national insurance for the lowest paid, just to make things even worse for them. We need the Chancellor of the Exchequer to top up universal credit and take it back to the rate that it was at during the pandemic. The removal of the £20 uplift is not only morally bankrupt, but economically illiterate. It affected 14,000 of my constituents, and £20 per week is a lot of money for them.

Another reform that the Government could support is in relation to public transport. Only 30% of households in my constituency have a car and therefore rely on public transport, at significant cost. Thankfully, the Mayor of Greater Manchester has brought the buses into the public sector. As a result, no one will have to pay more than £2 per journey, which will make life so much easier for people. The Government could also quite easily implement a windfall tax on the £31 billion-worth of profits from oil and gas companies—above the ordinary profit that these companies make. That could be used to help to alleviate people's problems, yet what does the Treasury say? "We'll give you a £200 loan that you must pay back to us." That is an insult to our constituents.

Many of my colleagues have today suggested practical steps that the Government could take. Bearing in mind that we are the fourth richest country in the world, we should not have constituents in poverty. I hope that the Minister listens to the suggestions put forward today and acts on them.

3.23 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): It is a delight to see you in the Chair, Ms Rees. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for securing the debate.

If anything proves how broken the current economic model is, it is the extent of in-work poverty—it does just that. I have listened carefully to the remarks from Government Members. You would not think, Ms Rees, that they have been in power for 12 years. The hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) talks about work being the best route out of poverty. Are cleaners not entitled to a decent wage? Are security staff who keep our hospital staff and patients safe not entitled to a

dignified life? Are care workers not entitled to the decency of a wage that they can live on? Are the shopworkers who we applauded not entitled to be able to make ends meet? Or have people got to leave those jobs and get "better" ones? What an indictment it is on this Government that they say such a thing.

It is a fact that one in six working families is now in poverty—a record high. It puts paid to all the Tories' boasts of job creation when the jobs that they are creating still confine people to destitution. The latest employment figures, published by the ONS yesterday, show that real wages dropped by 1.5% over the past year. That is the worst fall in real pay for eight years.

This is clearly a situation that the Government are actively pursuing. The motion they passed last month—effectively cutting pensions and social security payments by 3% to 4% in real terms—along with their slashing of the universal credit uplift, the rise of the energy price cap and the increase in national insurance contributions all point to the simple conclusion that this Government are knowingly pushing more and more families into circumstances where they have to choose between staying warm and putting food on the table.

Just as with the coalition Government's austerity programme after the financial crash, we hear from this Tory Government that it is those in most need who will have to bear the biggest brunt of the fallout of the covid crisis, and now the illegal and atrocious Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Government's argument is that the cost of living crisis is a sacrifice that must be made to oppose Putin's actions—it is nonsense and must be called out. Poverty is a political choice, and the Government are choosing for that sacrifice to be made by working people instead of the wealthy. In fact, despite the ongoing crises, billionaires have never had it so good.

Grahame Morris: Would my hon. Friend comment on the level of profits being generated by the energy distribution companies for gas and electricity, and what alternatives there are in windfall taxes on those companies?

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend makes a pertinent point. Those transmission companies are enjoying a scandalous rise in profits; if ever a case was made for public ownership of the transmission of energy, that is it. The time is absolutely now.

There are also a number of longstanding factors that have caused the spiralling levels of in-work poverty. Above all is the fact that the so-called national living wage of £8.91 an hour is significantly below a wage that people can actually survive on. I have said it time and again: we need to raise the minimum wage to a level that allows people to live fully flourishing lives, not just get by. The planned rise to £9.50 an hour next month simply will not cut it. In the midst of a cost of living crisis, with inflation soaring, the national minimum wage is nothing but a poverty wage. The time is right for a £15 an hour minimum wage—in fact, it is way overdue.

Different categories of workers are going to work with different types of employment rights. We need to consolidate those categories into a single status of worker so that people have the same full employment rights from day one. I am pleased to have introduced to this House the Status of Workers Bill, which was guided through the other place by my noble Friend Lord Hendy. I implore the Minister to allow the Bill the necessary

time to pass through this House, so that it can make the fundamental change to workers' rights that could do so much to turn the tide of in-work poverty.

3.28 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see a friend of the worker in the Chair, Ms Rees. I thank my good friend and comrade the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for making an excellent speech to kick off the debate. The contributions—with the possible exception of one—have been very impressive indeed.

I want to make a number of points. First, in-work poverty and inadequate living standards remain the norm for far too many people on these islands. We urge the UK Government to look at the minimum wage rates in the country. They need to not only amend the definition of a worker, but go further by strengthening protection for workers.

The UK is experiencing the highest levels of in-work poverty this century, which disproportionately impacts groups facing high living costs, such as lone parents—the majority of whom are women—disabled people and people with caring responsibilities. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation report that was mentioned earlier shows that around two thirds—the actual figure is 68%—of working-age adults in poverty in the UK live in a household where at least one adult is in work. The figure has never been higher since records began in 1996, so we now have the highest ever levels of in-work poverty. For too many people, low-paid jobs offer no opportunities to progress to better work and better wages, and far too many people are in insecure work with unpredictable hours and incomes, which is something that I want to touch on. That is, of course, in stark contrast to the situation in Scotland.

Grahame Morris: The hon. Member is making some excellent points, but I wonder what impact the Government's decision to close jobcentres will have on constituencies such as mine and perhaps 60 others. What impact will that have on alleviating in-work poverty and on encouraging people who are out of work into paid employment?

Chris Stephens: It will increase in-work poverty. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Government tried to close half the jobcentres in the city of Glasgow. People there are having to spend more money and go further in order to get to a jobcentre to see whether they can get better work.

As we have a Minister from the Department for Work and Pensions in front of us, I want to point out that a number of people claiming universal credit are in work. We have a situation—the Minister responded to a written question on this issue—whereby half of DWP claimants have their universal credit claims deducted. I would argue that that is a poverty tax. In some cases, £60 a month is taken away from someone's universal credit claim. Universal credit is supposed to be a subsistence benefit that is paid at a rate that people can live on. If we take £60 a month away from them, people have to choose whether to heat or eat. That really needs to end. Advances need to be replaced by an up-front grant or a starter payment, as we argued on the Work and Pensions Committee. The recovery of tax credits needs to be at a lower level, and I would say that debts of more than six years should be written off entirely. There are a number

of lawyers in the Chamber and they know that if I try to sue them for a debt that is over six years old, a sheriff in a Scottish court would write that off and absolve the debt.

I also want the Minister to respond to a point that I made earlier during my intervention on the hon. Member for Easington. In the jobs advertisements on the DWP website, 31% of full-time jobs and 50% of part-time jobs pay less than the real living wage of £9.90 an hour. Some 20% are advertised as paying less than the national living wage of £9.50. I will give three examples: Burger King pays £6 an hour, Pizza Express £6.56 an hour, and Farmfoods £6.66 an hour. None of the adverts clarifies wage rates for different ages, and all the companies have made substantial profits in the last year or two, so increasing the wage rates and asking them to pay more certainly would not harm those businesses all that much. I am talking about multinational companies, and I would like to know what the DWP is going to do about the adverts. Will it refer itself to the national minimum wage compliance unit, which has a number of vacancies? Perhaps we can advertise those jobs on the DWP website.

I want to touch on what my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) said about discrimination in the national minimum wage rates, because he is absolutely right. There is a nonsensical argument that somehow young people are not active participants in the labour market. If Burger King has a 17-year-old next to a 37-year-old and they are both flipping hamburgers, they are equal participants in the labour market and should be paid the same rate for doing the same work. That is what I call equal pay. The equal pay legislation always encourages people to get the same rate for the same job, the same work.

What would happen if we increased wages? People would spend money. A false argument is also made about public sector pay—that somehow it takes money out of the economy. But that is not how it works. When people get a wage increase, they do not put it in a shoebox and hide it under bed; they go out and spend it in the economy. It means that they can afford things that they could not afford before, so they spend more on food and other items.

To touch on the contribution of the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald)—I support his Bill and I know that he supports my Workers (Definition and Rights) Bill—there needs to be a definition of “worker”, so that we can strengthen workers' rights. For four years the Government have been sitting on the Taylor report, which sought to address the issues, but at the last Queen's Speech we were told that it was no longer a priority for them. That is scandalous. We need to take a real look at protection for workers and at eliminating zero-hours and other unfair contracts.

Employers are currently able to text four people to say, “The first one here gets the shift.” That has to end. People phone taxis and run out of the house to get there first, spending money as they do so, only to end up as the runner-up and get nothing. That is completely and utterly scandalous. I have included that in my Bill, because we need to address it. We also need to look at flexible working and at strengthening parental, neonatal and miscarriage leave for workers.

SNP MPs have consistently sought to strengthen workers' rights and have promoted Bills to do so. I commend the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union

[Chris Stephens]

for its Right to Food campaign. I will welcome that in Glasgow, because it has identified Glasgow South West as one of the constituencies in which it wants to do work. There is much that the Government need to do to address in-work poverty, before it gets even worse.

3.37 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairship, Ms Rees.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for, and congratulate him on, securing this debate in Westminster Hall. The passionate contributions from all, particularly Opposition Members, have made it clear that this is a crucial discussion. At the heart of the debate is a simple truth: we all want to get on in life. Many of us know the feeling of receiving our first pay packet—that sense of finally releasing our parents from the stress of having to afford us and from that worry about money. There is a feeling of ease—not of great wealth, but of having enough—and that is what we want every person in our country to feel. With hard work, that should be available to all. The truth, however, as we heard in so many countless examples, is that that feeling is not available to everyone.

The hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) described the simple law of economics that a high number of vacancies increases wages. If that were the case, real wages ought to be shooting up, but they are not. The fact is that economics does not have simple laws—if it did, a lot of economists would be out of work.

Things do not work like that; they are much more problematic. This is the challenge: there is a rocketing number of vacancies, but people are not able to get on in life. That is the problem. The Government themselves know that that is the case. They know we have a problem. They commissioned the in-work progression review by Ruby McGregor-Smith.

Peter Gibson: Will the hon. Member give way?

Alison McGovern: As I mentioned the hon. Gentleman, I will give way to him.

Peter Gibson: As a former employer of a substantial number of people in a very competitive industry, I frequently had to recruit people when demand was greater than the supply available. It was often the case that employers such as myself had to increase wages to make those jobs attractive and to bring people in from other employers. I was speaking from my own experience. Having spoken to employers in my own constituency who have vacancies, I know that they too are increasing their wages to attract people.

Alison McGovern: Perhaps the hon. Member could ask those other employers why real wages are not increasing, because that is what the data tells us is happening. Unfortunately, it turns out that the rules of supply and demand are not so simple when an economy has as many problems as those experienced in Britain.

The Government themselves—the hon. Member's own Government—know that this is a problem. They know that people are stuck in low pay, because they got Ruby McGregor-Smith to investigate and ask why people are simply not able to get on in life, earn a better pay packet

and look after their family. She found that there were myriad issues with the cost of childcare and transport, and that people are unable to get the right skills to move on and move up. In certain professions, including care, a culture of low pay means that people are not able to move on and get a well-paid job to look after themselves and their family.

Last February, the Secretary of State told me that she was the reason that the response to Ruby McGregor-Smith's report was being held up. My first question for the Minister is: when will the Government respond to that report? When will practical steps be taken to help working people get better pay? As the review found, there are myriad reasons why it is not a simple matter of supply and demand. It also showed that single parents have only so many hours in a day, and that if someone lives in a town whose bus service is so chronically bad that it limits their job choices, it is not their fault that they cannot get a better paid job. We need the Government to reply to that report.

My second question to the Minister is time-sensitive. Working people are facing a national insurance rise. If ever there were a time for such a tax rise, it is not now. People are dealing with truly horrific increases in energy bills and other costs. The Government really must rethink this. I want to quote an organisation that has spoken on this issue and on the underlying reason why this tax increase on workers is being brought about. It said:

“There is a large, unjustified and problematic bias against employment and labour incomes”.

That quote comes not from *Marxism Today*, but from the Institute for Fiscal Studies. The Government must rethink their whole approach to working people and how we make sure that people have decent pay.

To conclude, I want to come back to the point made by the hon. Member for Darlington about the iron law. As I have said to him on several occasions, it is not a matter of simple supply and demand. We only need to look around the economy today in Britain to realise that we can have rocketing vacancies while real pay does not go up. That is what is happening now. I ask myself what could possibly have gone wrong. The economics textbooks say it should work. What could have possibly gotten in the way of working people and a decent income?

Since 2010, the Tories have done the following: presided over a massive increase in zero and short-hours contracts; overseen a pandemic of low pay in key professions such as social care, which has driven chronic staff shortages; put charges on employment tribunals, so that working people find it much harder to get their rights confirmed; put roadblocks and bans in the way of trade unions, so that organising is harder; got rid of Unionlearn, which helped many working people get on; and overseen a labour market with a skills crisis and in which 20% of people have to work below their skill level, making it impossible for them to get on.

Rishi Sunak has put taxes up more times in two years than Gordon Brown did in 10 years, and he is landing working people with a devastating tax rise at the worst possible time. We have seen child poverty rise and food bank use explode, and 1 million experienced destitution in 2019. That is the problem. It has been a decade of doom for people trying to get on in life—a Labour Government is required.

3.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (David Rutley): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Rees. I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing the debate. I recall having had a similar debate with a similar cast list recently, so some of the arguments are familiar but some have been amplified. I take all of them seriously and will endeavour to answer some of the questions. No doubt others will be addressed separately, but I look forward to responding to them. Like the hon. Member, who is very kind, I wish the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies) a speedy recovery and return to good health. She would have been keen to be here had she had been able to.

Prior to this debate, I had just come out of a meeting with Communities that Work, a group of housing associations that help people into work and to progress in employment. I am grateful for the work it is doing. One of the participants was Helen Johnson, a livin futures manager at Livin Housing in the north-east, who is doing great work in Country Durham. Despite party political differences and different views on policy, we can all applaud the work those people are doing to help literally thousands of people—in this case, tenants—to achieve their potential in employment opportunities. I congratulate them on that work. All hon. Members present want to see everybody have the opportunity to progress in work, improve their earnings and realise their potential.

Andy McDonald: We hear with unerring regularity the mantra that the only way for someone to progress and live a good and flourishing life is to progress out of their current job. It will then be occupied by somebody else, who will be paid a low wage. Where is the dignity or decency in that philosophy, which does not have regard for the people doing the key jobs we applauded all the way through the pandemic?

David Rutley: I understand the hon. Member's point, and that is why we have taken steps in that direction. I was going to come on to that in my speech, but I will come to it now. The national living wage, which we have already talked about, is projected to increase to £10, and other steps are being taken. *[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for Easington would have the courtesy to let me respond. He raised that question earlier in the debate. Another important point is that policies, such as the increase in work allowances and the reduction in the taper rate for people on universal credit, are helping people in work to progress, do better and flourish.

We have already seen the creation of exiting job opportunities in the north-east, including through the industrial zone at the UK's largest freeport, Teesworks, which is expected to create 20,000 jobs. Many of them are in green energy, establishing literally a green industry revolution in a region that many hon. Members participating in the debate represent. We should not forget that 6,000 jobs will be created as a result of Nissan's plans for the UK's first large-scale battery factory, as part of a £1 billion electric vehicle hub in Sunderland. That is alongside Stockton being on the frontline in the battle against covid, with the Novavax vaccine being made in Billingham later this year.

Opportunities abound in the north-east. Of course, we need to go further. I am disappointed that we are not hearing about these opportunities. So often we recognise that there are challenges, but there are also opportunities, and this Government are working hard to create them.

Patricia Gibson: Will the Minister give way?

David Rutley: I would not dream of not giving way to the hon. Member, because she is always so polite with her questions.

Patricia Gibson: I want to press the Minister on something that has been in my inbox—in all of our inboxes, I am sure—in the last few weeks. One of the big outlays for people who are in work and suffering is the cost of petrol or diesel to get to work. We pay 58p per litre in fuel duty and 20% VAT on that—it is a tax on a tax. The Minister will know that the cost of petrol drives up the cost of goods and services across the whole economy, and that drives up and feeds inflation. Does he agree that if we cut the tax on petrol, we can stop inflation driving up into double digits?

David Rutley: I understand the point that the hon. Lady makes; she makes it well and she makes it long. Perhaps we could do an Adjournment debate on the subject later. I recognise her point—I was trying to bring in a bit of humour there. With the fuel duty freeze that has been put in place we have been able to keep that cap over time. I recognise that we are in challenging circumstances; that is why the Chancellor has put in place a three-point plan. We have £20 billion set out in this financial year that is designed to help vulnerable people facing challenges and to deal with rising energy costs, £9 billion of which goes to the Chancellor's three-point plan.¹ We are doing substantial work to try and address those challenges, and we will continue to review the situation. As hon. Members will appreciate, throughout the pandemic we looked at what the challenges were and we responded. We responded well in the Department I work in—universal credit was particularly resilient.

I want to address the questions raised during the debate. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens)—a good man who understands a lot of those matters—asked about jobs being advertised on the DWP website. They go through a process and are checked to make sure that they are at the minimum wage or above—there are obviously some exceptions. If he has further information on that, I will gladly follow up because I know he takes the issue very seriously.

Chris Stephens: I will send the Minister the articles from *The Ferret* website and *The Herald*, which found 10,000 such jobs in Scotland alone. Does that not suggest that there is a problem?

David Rutley: I will take a look at the hon. Gentleman's point. I am not familiar with all those issues, but he knows that I will follow that up.

Other points were raised about the health and social care levy, the purpose of which is to deal with backlogs in the NHS and the future costs of social care. Those with the broadest shoulders will rightly pick up the bulk of the cost, with the highest earning 14% paying around half of the revenues.

1. *[Official Report, 23 March 2022, Vol. 711, c. 2MC.]*

[David Rutley]

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who is no longer in the Chamber, spoke about statutory sick pay. That is just one part of our welfare safety net and the wider Government offer of support for people in times of need. As we move on from the pandemic, the Government are continuing to take a broader look at the role of SSP—we are keeping the system under review.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) always contributes well in these debates; I hope I have addressed some of his points about energy costs. We will continue to take a look at those issues.

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) was concerned about uprating, but we have followed the time-worn process of looking at inflation in the year to September. All benefit ratings since April 1987 have been done on that basis; the Opposition could have changed that approach when they were in Government. However, in recognition of the challenges we face, we have a £20 billion package of support this year to help people.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West also talked about deductions. I remind colleagues that we have put a spotlight on deductions, and we have reduced the maximum amount from 40% to 25%.

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister look at the issue of pursuing debts that are over six years old? It seems a nonsense that we still pursue people who have had a debt for longer than that period, and then taking a deduction.

David Rutley: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, but as a member of the Work and Pensions Committee he will also realise that we are experiencing record levels of fraud, and we are absolutely determined to bear down on that. We need to get the balance right, because it is taxpayers' money that we are talking about.

Alison McGovern: Just to remind the Minister, when will the Government respond to the in-work progression report?

David Rutley: Of course, we recognise that we need to do more on in-work progression. The hon. Member is right to highlight that and we will respond shortly, and the response will be important. We are already taking action in this area, and I did not focus on that today

because it was focused on in a previous debate. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) wanted to know what we were doing differently on progression, and I confirmed then and confirm now that we are working to put in place progression champions across the country who will make connections between employers, local authorities and skills providers and help more people to progress in work, which all of us across this Chamber want to achieve.

I believe passionately that we need to help people to see the opportunities before them and realise their potential. The plan for jobs helps people into work and also provides lots of mechanisms to enable people to progress in work. The progression work coaches will be a vital tool to help with that agenda. We know there is more to be done, and we are working hard to deliver on it.

3.56 pm

Grahame Morris: I thank everyone who has participated in the debate. I particularly thank the Minister for his courteous responses to the points put by Labour Members, and I thank the hon. Members for Darlington (Peter Gibson) and for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer), who made some excellent points. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and for Wirral South (Alison McGovern). I also thank the hon. Members for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill), for Glasgow East (David Linden), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens).

Some really good points have been put forward as a critique of existing policies in relation to a raft of things that I hope the Minister has taken note of. We look forward to such issues being addressed in the spring statement.

I conclude by saying that there are young people across this country subsisting on poverty pay with little hope or prospect of home ownership or a decent pension. They are crippled by student debt and long for a standard of living above the breadline. We look to the Government to come up with policies to address that. If the Minister and his colleagues cannot, there are people willing and waiting to take up that challenge.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered in-work poverty.

Future of Soft Power

3.58 pm

Christina Rees (in the Chair): I will call John Baron to move the motion and will then call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of soft power.

It is a pleasure to be called to speak, Ms Rees. I thank the Speaker's Office for selecting it and the Minister for Asia and the Middle East, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling), for attending. I know she is very busy.

It is fair to say that the west has relaxed its guard and enjoyed a peace dividend following the cold war. We thought the concept of democracy would sweep the field—that the very righteousness of the cause would sweep all before it—and it therefore required little investment. But democracy is a fragile concept; it needs nurturing, encouraging and protecting. Many in this world do not share our values. As Ukraine has shown, we are engaged in a new battle for democracy. If there was any doubt about that, we need only look at the recent UN vote on the cruel invasion of a sovereign country, where more than half of the world's population as represented by their Governments did not condemn it.

In this new era, this new cold war, we need to talk softly and carry a big stick, if we are to defend our values. Our values have stood the test of time but, at times, have required defending. I suggest that we now require a significant and sustained increase in spending on both hard and soft power capabilities. Soft power was a key factor in our victory in the cold war.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It was President Roosevelt who said, "Talk softly but carry a big stick"—I understand it is an African proverb. If we are going to have soft power, we need to have hard power behind it to back it up, otherwise it does not work. I think we are at the stage where we have learned from our mistakes in the west. It is time to get it right.

Mr Baron: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. We have to do more to realise that democracy needs defending. We have to step up to the plate—not just this country, but the west generally—and commit sufficient resources, to ensure that we can talk softly, which we should always do first, but carry a big stick, because the big stick reinforces the weight of the soft diplomacy. We live in a hard world, but people will listen if they think we have assets that could be committed. I am an ex-soldier. War should always be the measure of last resort, but we need to talk and have the assets behind us to reinforce the weight of those talks.

This country should be proud. We have the BBC World Service, the British Council, our music industry, our culture, our values and the rule of law. There is little doubt—in fact, it has been shown through various measurements—that the UK is the world's soft-power superpower, and we should be very proud of that.

During the invasion of Ukraine, the number of listeners to the BBC World Service in Russia went up three or four times. Listeners to the Ukrainian service went up to 5 million. Yet we are still debating whether the BBC World Service and BBC Monitoring budgets should be ringfenced. There is a question mark over their funding.

The British Council last year was in touch with more than 750 million people worldwide for education, arts and the English language. That is a phenomenal achievement. On the UK music industry, I will share with colleagues that I am not very good at contemporary music, but I am reliably informed that three of the top 10 artists came from these shores. That is punching above our weight and helps to create the positive view of this country—there is a lot to be positive about—but it also reaches out and makes contact with people globally.

There is, however, growing competition for influence. We cannot stand still. Individual states, many of them not democratic, are looking to invest and are investing to enhance their soft power around the world. Cultural institutes such as the British Council are an effective way of doing so, and one which truly global nations all employ. As chair of the British Council all-party parliamentary group, I will confine my remarks to that wonderful organisation.

I remind the Minister that other cultural institutes of other countries receive far greater amounts and proportions of public funding, between 40% to 50% of their total income. Whether it is the Goethe-Institut, or Confucius Institutes, or whatever, they get around half their income from the state. The amount is only around 15% from the British Government, because the British Government have said that the British Council must rely on its own commercial activities to help fund its endeavours. That is fine, except when those revenues fall through the floor in a pandemic year. It is, therefore, with regret for many of us—across the Floor in this House, but also in the other place—that the Government did not fully compensate for the loss of commercial income by the British Council as a result of the pandemic.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for taking an intervention, and for his fantastic work for the British Council. Its work is crucial—he is highlighting the loss of revenue—but we often forget about the revenues it generates through its great work and the number of people it introduces to British education and infrastructure. People who go through the British education system become allies of the United Kingdom, and continue that in their businesses and the posts that they hold, including Chevening scholars. The British Council does a tremendous amount of work that is rarely recognised, particularly in terms of funding.

Mr Baron: I completely concur with the hon. Gentleman's comments. Sometimes we talk about figures and percentages too much in this place. We need to step back and realise that the British Council does an awful lot of good work that reaches into people's lives on a global basis.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on his work chairing the APPG, of which I am a member. He makes the point around soft power and the value we get from that. The British Council really does

[Karen Bradley]

punch above its weight, as does the whole UK, in terms of soft power, but there is a price for liberty, which we are seeing all too clearly around the world at the moment. That price is eternal vigilance. That means we need to invest in those assets, such as the British Council. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is vital?

Mr Baron: I completely agree. I have been remiss in not thanking APPG members for being here today and contributing to the debate.

I am conscious that others want to contribute. I know we have half an hour, but I do not want to speak for the full 15 minutes. I want to address the issue of funding with the Minister, because funding the British Council was one reason I applied for this debate.

Let me be clear: the Government were generous in increasing the budget to the British Council during the pandemic, but the problem is that it was still £10 million short of fully compensating the British Council when it came to its commercial activities. For those who do not know—I do not think anyone here does not—its commercial activities essentially centre on teaching English in the far east.

Being £10 million short, it had to close 20 country operations, which is an ongoing process. Those countries were Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the USA, Slovakia, Slovenia, Malta, Switzerland, Belgium, Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Afghanistan, Chile, Namibia, Uruguay, South Sudan and Sierra Leone. That is a long list of countries, including the Five Eyes and others, where we should not be closing the British Council's soft power operations.

The British Council wants to be ambitious about what it delivers for the UK, in partnership with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, when the world reopens for business and manages the shock of Russian aggression in eastern Europe. However, looking at the CSR—the comprehensive spending review—budget going forward, having the 20 closures in train, we were delighted to see a 21% increase in funding for the FCDO over a three-year period. The Minister will recognise that figure. Yet, we now find that further cuts are being proposed to the British Council, below the £171 million of annual public funding that the council needs to carry on its sterling work across the global network, when it put its bid in to the FCDO.

In other words, despite the FCDO receiving a 21% funding increase over the three-year period, the British Council was going to be cut. Those negotiations are ongoing. I implore the Minister to have a look at the figures and to try and ensure that there are no further country closures, because the British Council is already having to deal with 20 from the previous cuts. Any more would hardly fit with the ambition and concept of global Britain. We need to show solidarity with our friends and allies, not only to counter the rising threat of autocracy around the world, but to secure much needed trade deals for the UK. We stand less chance of doing that if we are cutting our soft power capabilities in key countries, many of them strong allies of the UK.

In conclusion, my questions to the Minister are threefold. First, will she confirm when the British Council will

receive notice of its full allocation for the spending review period? I ask that because the organisation cannot be expected to make any plans given the uncertainty created by this lack of notice; it needs to know sooner rather than later.

Secondly, will the Government confirm that the current negotiations will not result in a further cut, itself resulting in further country closures? I hope the Government get it, in the sense of understanding that we need to strengthen the UK's soft power capability during this moment of global stability.

Finally, will the Government stop touting the figure of a 26% funding increase? I have heard it bandied about so often, but it is misleading because it is comparing a pandemic year with a non-pandemic year. It is not comparing like for like. Despite a 26% increase in funding, the figure was still £10 million short of fully compensating the British Council for its loss of commercial revenue during the pandemic year, which is why it had to close 20 country operations. Hiding behind percentage increases does not mask the truth that we withdrew from the world stage, because there was a £10 million shortfall that resulted in those 20 country closures. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

Mr Mahmood *rose*—

Christina Rees (in the Chair): Order. This being a 30-minute debate, we do not usually take contributions from other Members unless they have permission from the Member in charge and the Minister.

Mr Baron: The hon. Member has permission from me, Ms Rees.

4.12 pm

Mr Mahmood: Very briefly, there is never a reason to speak after the chairman of the APPG has spoken, because he is always so eloquent, particularly in describing the needs of the British Council, and some great work has been done for a long time in support of it.

The hon. Member talked with passion about the British Council, and I agree with him, because as I said in my intervention, it is not just a financial organ. I would caution the Government against knowing the cost of everything and the value of nothing, because value is what the British Council has provided. In Russia, for instance, it has provided a huge amount of access to education. In Commonwealth countries in particular, it provides a huge amount of access for people who would not otherwise have access to the type of education that those countries need to become better democracies and to build better communities and societies that we want to engage with. That is the value of the British Council: supporting people to do that and to go on to higher and further education. But on top of that, when people enter into education their mindsets change, away from other doctrines and towards democracy and valuing human life. That is one of the really important things that the British Council does.

The British Council also does a huge amount to support our trade, because when we have people understanding English and coming here to get their education at our universities, they build up links that they want to retain when they go back, whether they are

in private or Government jobs, and the amount of connection that creates is of huge value. The £10 million shortfall over the covid period was a horrendous loss for those countries and their people's education. It has had a huge effect on those people, who we want to be able to support.

I will be quick, Ms Rees, because I know that time is limited. We have to understand the value of this work. This is why we are all so passionate about it. We have to understand that it is not just about what we put in to keep those offices open; it is also about the value we get in return, because the soft power that the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) spoke about is hugely important.

Karen Bradley: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who indulges me by allowing me to intervene a second time. Does he agree that it would be wonderful if there was some way of assessing the value of institutions such as the British Council, which is so much more than the money that goes in? If only the Treasury had a way of assessing the overall value to the United Kingdom, rather than just looking at the pounds going in, we would appreciate those institutions all the more.

Mr Mahmood: I totally agree with the right hon. Lady, who makes a valid point. That sort of assessment could be made if we looked at the number of people who come to our universities to be educated and who then keep in contact when they go back home, and also through our embassies and our imports.

The hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay made an important point about Brexit and having new deals and contracts with different countries. Once we have that heritage, people want to talk to us. Once we have that connection, people want to come back and talk to us, and to make sure that they retain that connection. That is really important for us. Certainly in the Maghreb countries, there are people who are moving away from France and want more English classes in order to understand English, so that is another issue we should look at. That would mean an incalculable amount of finance coming back into the country, so we need to look at that.

I will reinforce the case made by the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay by urging the Minister to ensure that we get a clear indication of the budgets that will be set, bearing in mind the losses there have been, and hopefully those will now be increased. Such an investment would be well made not just for the British Council but, most importantly, for us as the United Kingdom.

4.17 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Middle East (Amanda Milling): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) on securing the debate, which I am pleased to respond to, and I thank him for all his work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the British Council. I am also grateful to the other Members who have contributed to the debate through speeches and interventions. I will try to address some of their points as well as answering the questions put by my hon. Friend.

The UK's soft power is rooted in who we are, our democratic values and our way of life. It is central to our international identity as an open, trustworthy nation.

Our strength in this area is widely recognised. In a recent British Council study, we ranked as the most attractive country for young people in the G20. Only yesterday, the latest global soft power index was published, placing us second out of 120 countries. Other countries trust the UK; they appreciate our values and they want to work with us. They are enthusiastic for our culture, from our premier league football to our music. Of course, there are our brilliant products, from cars to fashion and food.

We must never take our soft power for granted, especially now that freedom and democracy are under attack and we see disinformation all around. We will continue to build our influence and seek to inspire; to forge links with people around the world to promote our values. This is how we will champion freedom and rights on the international stage, and challenge those who seek to tear down democracy. We are blessed with many wonderful and powerful tools in that regard.

My hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay mentioned what I will describe as the battle of the values. Our international leadership, which we demonstrate every day, is crucial in the battle for hearts and minds. We are showcasing it through our unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Putin's barbaric illegal invasion, and in our steadfast support for our democratic partners, through the UN Security Council, NATO, the G7 and partnerships such as AUKUS. Beyond that, we are championing open societies and promoting the rule of law through our economic, security and development leadership.

The British Council is another vital instrument for our influence overseas. It demonstrates our strength and values in practical ways, building trust and opportunities between nations. The British Council, which has been a trusted partner for more than 85 years, teaches the English language and promotes UK education, arts and culture across the globe; operates in more than 100 countries and reaches 76 million people; promotes UK higher education through Study UK; showcases British creativity through arts such as the current UK/Australia Season; and provides English language and teacher training. The British Council delivers for the whole UK, forging theatre connections between Wales and Nigeria, and cultural networks between Northern Ireland and India. Building on the success of COP26, it has connected young people in Glasgow with its global schools network.

My hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay referred to the British Council's offices. In a digital age, it would be a strategic mistake to judge the British Council's impact in a country purely and solely by the physical presence of an office. During the covid crisis, the British Council embraced new technologies, including online teaching platforms, which were vital to its operations—as they were to all our operations as we sat in front of Zoom and its equivalents. The British Council has ambitious growth targets: by 2020, 30 million people will experience UK arts each year, an increase of 800 million in five years; and one in 10 people globally—more than 140 million people—will learn English through the council.

Mr Baron: Will the Minister give way?

Amanda Milling: I will give way, but I was just about to answer some of my hon. Friend's questions.

Mr Baron: I look forward to receiving the answers. Of course we live in a digital age, but a physical presence is still important and very symbolic. Presidents and Prime Ministers of countries that we are pulling out of raise it with our own ambassadors. The fact that they are upset by that is a mark of the importance that they attach to the British Council. Will the Minister reflect on that?

Amanda Milling: I will talk a little more about the offices in a moment, if my hon. Friend will bear with me.

Since the start of the pandemic, we have allocated more than £560 million to the British Council to support our shared goals—that is a generous deal in the current financial climate—including £180 million in grant and aid funding for 2021-22, which is an increase of £40 million over last year. The British Council's non-official development assistance allocation was £39 million, which is triple its 2020-21 baseline. Although we have had to make difficult decisions in other areas, we have increased the money that we have made available to the British Council. The challenging fiscal environment continues, and we are working closely with the council on final allocations for the coming settlement review period. They will be confirmed at the conclusion of the Department's financial and business planning process. As we look to the future, our partnership will continue to be vital.

On the operational structure and offices, the country presence remains an operational matter for the British Council. As I say, we are working closely with it on the final funding settlements.

I also want to mention the BBC World Service, if I have a bit of time. That is another organisation that is really important in promoting our values.

Mr Baron: Before the Minister goes on, will she give way?

Amanda Milling: Quickly.

Mr Baron: I take on board what the Minister says about the budget being operational, but when a budget is cut—it was cut, in effect, because there was not full compensation for that loss of commercial revenue—these are the decisions that come out at the other end of the sausage machine. The funding is not there. I support everything she said about the British Council—she has spoken very eloquently about it—but those are just

words unless we fund it appropriately. Will she address my second question, which is perhaps the most important? At a time when the FCDO budget is increasing by more than 20% over the three-year CSR period, why are negotiations ongoing that, as I and colleagues understand it, suggest a cut to the British Council? That does not make sense when we have this fight on our hands in the battle for global democracy.

Amanda Milling: My hon. Friend is a very powerful champion for the British Council, but, as I say, we are working closely with it while we reach the final funding settlements following the spending review.

May I please have a couple of minutes on the BBC World Service? It brings high-quality impartial news to global audiences across the world, including in regions where free speech is limited. It reaches 364 million people every week with an increase in audience numbers of more than 40% since the FCDO-funded World 2020 programme began in 2016. It delivers in 42 different languages, and the licence fee currently funds English and another 29 from a commitment of £250 million a year. The FCDO World 2020 programme funds an additional 12 language services across Serbia, India, Africa and Asia, with additional funding provided to existing services in Russian, Arabic and English.

I probably do not have time to go into that in much more detail. We have talked about the importance of the British Council and of the BBC World Service, and I also want to talk about the overseas network. Another huge soft power asset is our diplomatic network, which is one of the largest in the world. We have 282 posts in 179 countries and territories staffed by 4,500 staff from across Government. Our network promotes our values and delivers our priorities with positive impacts right across the world.

In conclusion, I once again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay for securing the debate and for everything he does to promote the British Council and fight its cause. He is a real champion for the British Council. I reiterate that we are determined to use every soft power tool we have to promote open, democratic societies across the world. We will to cherish and sustain our assets, from the BBC to the British Council, championing education, culture and diplomacy, making a positive difference, standing up for our values and demonstrating the international leadership that is so vital in these incredibly challenging times.

Question put and agreed to.

Local Enterprise Partnerships

4.30 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the status of local enterprise partnerships.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Ms Rees, and I thank everyone for attending the debate.

I am delighted to have secured the debate at such a critical time for local enterprise partnerships, when strategic, business-led, local economic growth remains in rather a state of suspended animation following the LEP review. In East Sussex, we have been well-served by LEPs over the past 10 years and I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up recognised and affirmed the vital role that LEPs can continue to play in the recent levelling-up White Paper. It would have been all too easy for him to have looked for a headline and to have announced the creation of successor bodies, so I congratulate him for the leadership and common sense that he has shown on the issue.

That said, the sector is in limbo as it awaits clarity on its future role and, critically, confirmation of the funding it needs to fulfil it. That is creating an inability to plan, and the continued uncertainty has seen some of our most talented people leave LEPs. It is also having an impact on our business leaders, who give their time and experience in support of their local areas. They will not stay at the table for long if the uncertainty continues or if they do not feel valued.

It is six weeks to the day since at the levelling-up White Paper was published and LEPs have very much welcomed its conclusions. The value of LEPs is based on an array of evidence about their impact across the country, and a visit to any of their websites or social media platforms will demonstrate the huge amount of work that is under way. Only last week, the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), who is the Minister with responsibility for the digital economy, was in Hull to launch the latest LEP local digital skills partnership, which equips people across Hull and East Yorkshire with the skills needed to support the region's digital jobs boom and to ensure that more residents can benefit from the thriving local tech sector. LEPs are also home to, and work closely with, world-leading sector champions, from creative industries, cyber and net zero through to defence and space. LEPs are already bringing together critical clusters to support innovation and turbocharge growth.

In research and development and innovation, LEPs are making groundbreaking advances based on high-tech economic clusters. They are demonstrating their value in a way that is crystal clear, whether through cell and gene therapy in Hertfordshire, the first test flight of a hybrid electric aircraft in the south-west, developing new agri-tech systems in the midlands, strengthening cyber-security technology in Gloucestershire, automation and robotics in Oxfordshire, or building new supply lines for future electric vehicles in Coventry. Some of the largest stand-out examples of innovation are driven by LEPs, which was also cited in the White Paper.

In my own beautiful constituency of Hastings and Rye, the South East local enterprise partnership, or SELEP, has had a major impact thanks to its ability to

convene partners, build strong relationships and help to put the required structures and processes in place to help local businesses thrive.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): I commend the hon. Member for having secured a debate on LEPs, because the LEP in my own Thames valley region does a great deal of work to bring together businesses, local government, the third sector and higher education so that they work collectively not just for our region but for UK plc. Does she agree that when those groups are all talking in unison and agreeing with the likes of myself that we need to build a western rail link to Heathrow, which is the No.1 infrastructure priority in our region, the Government should agree to such work rather than delaying it, as is currently the case?

Christina Rees (in the Chair): Order. It is nice to see that you have not lost your technique for long interventions, Mr Dhese.

Sally-Ann Hart: The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhese) makes a good point about partnership working, but I cannot comment on the western Heathrow link as I do not know enough about it.

Turning to skills, LEPs have significant success in the sector, in particular through skills advisory panels. Business feeds directly into that SAP data and relies on the cross-co-operation and capacity of LEPs to gather and deliver that level of information at scale. No other organisation does that locally and it connects directly with the aims of the Government's proposed unit for future skills. LEPs also co-fund the Careers and Enterprise Company's enterprise adviser network, which has brought nearly 3,000 business volunteers into schools to support and stimulate vital career choices for students. The convening role of the LEPs has boosted the benefits, scale and reach of that partnership, enabling more business stakeholders to connect directly with local schools.

Furthermore, LEPs work in cross-partnership to deliver solid results for their skills boot camps and institutes of technology, addressing skills needed in green technology, the heavy goods vehicle and logistics sector, digital, advanced manufacturing and the construction sector. Again, that helps to deliver on another White Paper ambition to resolve acute national and local skills shortages.

Only last week, the Higher Education Commission launched its latest report on innovation, again highlighting the central role that LEPs can play in driving innovation across our regions. More broadly, LEPs have played a critical role in supporting our local small and medium-sized enterprises through the pandemic and the recovery, too. That is absolutely right in East Sussex.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I was delighted to hear my hon. Friend refer to the work of the Coventry and Warwickshire LEP in supporting suppliers of the electric vehicle supply chain. She talked about SMEs, and the Coventry and Warwickshire LEP has supported 5,500 businesses, organising a whole range of roundtables. Is not the great strength of LEPs that they bring private sector expertise into an area that was originally only for the public sector?

Sally-Ann Hart: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The commerciality of the minds in the LEP adds to the local authorities, giving that broad cross-section of expertise.

In the past year alone, 1.6 million businesses turned to their local LEP growth hub for advice and support. During the most challenging times of the pandemic, LEPs designed and delivered more than 100 local initiatives, targeting help and support to give local businesses the best chance at survival. They played a similar role in preparation for exiting the EU. They are now looking at how global challenges are impacting on local business. The intel is fed into central Government weekly, providing real-time data and insight. LEPs have shown it, the White Paper confirms it, and I am confident from my discussions with my local LEP that they have a unique role to play in the future.

The LEP structure, however, of regional collaboration with public and private organisations and individuals, with a unique focus on improving local economic growth, is potentially under threat. Six weeks on from the review, LEPs have no confirmation of their future role nor, more critically, how or whether they will be funded to fulfil that role—hence I am here today to ask the Minister for clarity on that important issue. We must turn the words of the White Paper into tangible policy. Action is now a matter of urgency.

In conclusion—though quite a long conclusion—I would welcome the Minister's consideration of the following points. The Government must please clearly define and establish the future functions of LEPs and make them clear to all parties. If the functions are not clear, or no obligation to consult them is made, any meaningful role will simply be lost to posterity in future structures.

It is vital that the local independent business voice of LEPs is safeguarded for it to be engaged in local economic planning and decision making, and that the LEPs' local government partners recognise that. More than 2,000 local business leaders offer their time and expertise through LEPs to support their local economies. They are an asset that we cannot afford to lose. Involving that local voice in devolution agreements will help to keep business around the table. The private sector expertise and investment has many regional benefits and we need to encourage a culture of enterprise and engagement.

We also need to recognise that LEPs' business acumen is already helping to identify and drive some of the biggest groundbreaking economic clusters in the country, generating jobs and pulling in more private sector leverage than public finance alone. In one example, a LEP's brokering capability generated an investment ratio of 12:1 for a local sector cluster, and it is still increasing. That capability, at minimal cost to the public purse, could simply disappear if we do not clearly establish their function now. It is not the number of allocated capital pots that counts; it is about LEPs having the ability to influence how that capital is spent. That is really fundamental.

For many, the journey to devolution could be a lengthy one. The White Paper suggest that it is a decade-long ambition, and some suggest even longer. In some areas, there may be no greater appetite for Mayors or county deals than we currently see, and the focus on immediate mayoral combined authorities reflects only about 32% of all areas, because approximately 68% of LEPs are not covered by MCAs. LEPs rely on European funding

to support skills and deliver projects, so they will therefore need to access the UK shared prosperity fund to do the same, as the vast majority will not be in MCAs. Ultimately, we need to identify the functions and pathways for LEPs outside MCAs.

Through their unique collaboration and local business voice, LEPs broker investments that deliver the jobs, environment and local taxes that local communities need and depend on. It is now vital to ensure that LEPs have the teeth and funding, so that they can continue to develop the opportunities that play such a significant part in levelling up the entire country from north to south and east to west, including our coastal communities.

Christina Rees (in the Chair): I would like to start the wind-ups at 5.12 pm in order to give Sally-Ann Hart a couple of minutes to sum up at the end. I do not think there is any need to put a time limit on speeches, as long as you are kind to one another.

4.42 pm

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) on securing an important debate for all local enterprise partnerships up and down the land. Indeed, since 2010, local enterprise partnerships have been integral to growth. The contribution that LEPs make to the prosperity of the nation is invaluable, and I want to make the case as to why nowhere is that more clear than in the country of Buckinghamshire.

The Buckinghamshire local enterprise partnership has played a vital role in determining local economic priorities and driving job creation, workforce skills and growth. It is quite a startling statistic that 55% of all new commercial and industrial employment space in the county of Buckinghamshire over the past five years has been delivered on the local enterprise partnership-managed enterprise zone sites at Westcott, which is wholly in my constituency, Silverstone Park, which is roughly half in my constituency and half in that of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), and a further site next door, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler).

With 14,000 active members, the LEP's Buckinghamshire Business First growth hub has filled the void and delivered a unified business voice across the county. Let me give a few examples. Over the 12 months from the start of the covid crisis, it provided 65,000 essential business assists. Ahead of any of the Government support that was announced and delivered, the LEP covid recovery fund provided £1.6 million directly into business survival and it was the first LEP in the country to act in such a way. The impact is clear: all 62 businesses supported are still trading, 197 new jobs have already been created and 258 have been safeguarded.

The LEP skills hub in Buckinghamshire is ranked No. 1 in the country by the Careers and Enterprise Company. Buckinghamshire is the first area in the country to have enterprise advisors active in every state school in the county, and the LEP's annual skills show is the biggest single skills event in the south-east of England. The LEP has supported transformative projects such as Pinewood Studios in the constituency of my

hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), which has helped the UK film industry grow by 18% in the last five years. Those are some incredible examples. I could give more, but time is against me. By working more closely together, local enterprise partnerships will continue to maximise job creation, growth and real investment right across the country, delivering long-term, meaningful results, particularly for communities outside London.

Brexit was about removing the distortions created by European Union membership, doing things differently in ways that work better for the communities we serve and promoting productivity and prosperity. LEPs are an integral part of that vision. There has never been a more exciting time to be involved with local enterprise partnerships, not least in Buckinghamshire, where our LEP has invested wisely. Its capital programme funds have been recycled. Investment loans have been repaid and enterprise income secured—all to enable Buckinghamshire to operate independently of taxpayer support if necessary. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye said, LEPs need certainty. I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will give us some reassuring words and actions.

4.46 pm

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), who made some valid points. We are all here seeking certainty, and I hope to hear more information from the Minister, as many of our LEPs have contacted us asking for clarity.

I work closely with the GFirst LEP in Gloucestershire. My patch is Stroud. Even before my election, the LEP was really helpful. It was easy to approach and had a helpful team. It is packed full of a diverse range of skills and made up of local businesses across Gloucestershire. I find that it shares my attitude that, in Stroud, it is getting things done that matters to people. That means working with everybody, regardless of party politics, and making sure that the people they are engaging with can make a difference. I find that an effective, pragmatic approach—and one that is not always present in all aspects of an MP's life as we try to move things forward.

I have inherited many projects that are decades old and need some attention and a bit of a kick up the backside. The LEP assists me with that. A key aspect of the LEP and the work I do with it is in harnessing the power of businesses in the private sector, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) mentioned. Private sector businesses are our job makers and wealth creators and are vital in getting things done. If we do not have their brains and aptitude on certain issues, things fall down, particularly when they get mired in long-term squabbles.

It is important that we think carefully about the future of LEPs. I have no issue with that. I know from speaking to colleagues across the House that not all LEPs are performing brilliantly and we have to acknowledge that. The word “patchy” comes up when people talk about local enterprise partnerships and there are questions about the value that they bring to some areas—not mine, but others.

It is also safe to say that not all work with their local MPs and their local community champions of councils and councillors. Some operate as mysterious benevolent bodies doling out millions of pounds of taxpayers' money. They make no reference at all to the Government or local businesses and community champions that could give them some guidance about the best place to spend that money. I understand why the Minister and his team are looking at LEPs, particularly as we are looking at new models of devolution, but I do not want the Government to throw the baby out with the bath water.

I will go through a few of the projects that we have been working on locally. We have growth hubs in our college. It is an ambition of our Skills and Post-16 Education Bill work with the Department for Education that we bring businesses into our further education colleges. We are already doing that through the work of the LEP, including by providing net zero advice and supporting businesses. I have some fantastic local businesses in my area, such as The Boys Who Sew, which have valued the advice and support. We have a huge bid request in to host the world's first fusion power station in my patch, which has involved every single aspect of local enterprise; a LEP is certainly a big part and player in that. The GFirst LEP chairs in the western gateway area are all members on the gateway board, so we work closely together.

I want to give credit to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk)—he would be here, but having been elevated to Solicitor General, he is not allowed to join in these debates—who, working closely with the GFirst LEP, has worked tirelessly to create the cyber-cluster for Cheltenham, Gloucestershire and the western gateway. It was one of the discussion topics at the inaugural meetings for the western gateway and it is now actually happening, so we can certainly chalk that up as a win.

On skills, we have a joint portal between the county council and the GFirst LEP, and an employment charter, which is being piloted across the county at the moment, involving about 20 employers and a number of schools. We also have 10 business sector groups. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye said, if we delay making decisions or giving those groups certainty, we will lose those busy people. They are not going to stick around; they will go and join another group if they can see that that is worth while.

In essence, LEPs can improve by being more transparent and helping more people to understand what they are there for. They can do better at showing where the money is coming from and why they are spending it, and they can work better in some areas with their MPs, councils and councillors. However, I support what they are doing—certainly in Gloucestershire—and I hope we are able to give them certainty so that they are able to plan and continue doing good work. As Government work with the levelling-up fund and the prosperity fund comes along the line, we have a lot to do. LEPs are a big part of that.

4.52 pm

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): I thank you for your chairmanship, Ms Rees, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann

[Andrew Lewer]

Hart) for securing this debate. The debate around LEPs is of particular interest to me because when I was leader of Derbyshire County Council from 2009 to 2013, I was there, in the thick of it, when the old regional development agencies were dissolved and the new concept of local enterprise partnerships was created. I helped to create D2N2 and sat on the board of that LEP for some years, so I had a ringside seat in terms of the strengths and weaknesses that the new organisation brought to the table.

One great weakness was that there was a lot of overlap: different areas were in all sorts of different LEPs, which caused all sorts of problems. There was, perhaps, a weakness of political will in the centre, with that sort of washing machine salesman theory of politics: someone creates something exciting, and for six months Ministers talk about it as the great solution to everything; then, something else comes along and interests fade or distractions happen.

I got a sense of that when I was the Member of the European Parliament for the East Midlands, where I was the European Conservatives and Reformists group co-ordinator for the Committee on Regional Development. It was certainly clear there that regions were still where it was at, whatever we had decided to do in England. From 12 months after the creation of LEPs, the background of a lack of central focus and drive was sometimes quite apparent.

Since my election as Member of Parliament for Northampton South in 2017, I have worked closely with SEMLEP, the South East Midlands Local Enterprise Partnership, on a range of issues such as local town regeneration, company growth funding pots and larger, more ambitious investment programmes—it is almost a sort of Voldemort moment—such as the Oxford to Cambridge arc. Over the past 12 to 13 years, I have seen what works well and what does not work so well, and I have some general observations to make from my experience, given the current time and context. Policy initiatives such as levelling up are hitting the ground just as the economically damaging covid emergency finally recedes and just in time for a whole new set of economic pressures. This fits in well with my time and role on the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee and as chairman of the devolution all-party parliamentary group.

First, LEPs are not perfect. There are issues around geography; not all LEPs fall very neatly within boundaries. There are some perceived overlaps, and in the case of the Oxford-Cambridge arc, we could see some perceived underlaps. It is worth noting that the Oxford-Cambridge arc LEPs tried to adapt and co-operate with other LEPs to meet the milestones. That has been encouraging, but the arc is not in the levelling-up White Paper, and now there is an explosion of question marks around it and its future.

The LEPs themselves are not perfect, but they are there. They have a pool of critical knowledge, expertise and relationships to draw from. The machine works pretty well, so I would like the Minister to speak about the changes and whether growth funding pots will go through LEPs henceforth. Now, at this critical juncture, might not be the time to mess around with organisational architecture, tempting though it may be. We should not make the perfect the enemy of the good.

There are always risks. When Northamptonshire Enterprise Partnership dissolved a couple of years ago, not only the senior leadership but almost the entire staff—with their deep wells of knowledge and, critically, their interpersonal relationships—disappeared overnight. It has taken time for those gaps to be filled, a phenomenon that my hon. Friends the Members for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) and for Hastings and Rye have referred to. I have personally had a good relationship with SEMLEP, and I am loth to start all over again when my focus in this instance is not so much on the vehicle as the destinations, looking for progress, not perfection.

My constituency has many challenges, as do the greater geographies of counties and regions, but they also have great opportunities for improvements, which is what our focus should be on. LEPs have the economic expertise, relationships, knowledge and history of public-private partnerships that we can draw on heavily. As my noble Friend Lord Lilley said many years ago, I have a little list, but I will simply say that Northampton has seen some great achievements through the LEPs, including the Vulcan ironworks, MAHLE Powertrain, Northampton College's advanced engineering centre and digital skills academy, and MK:5G. Of course, there is displacement theory in the economy—just because money has been spent here, it does not necessarily mean it would not have been spent better by companies themselves, or elsewhere. This is spending packaged as investment; it is still taxpayers' money. Nevertheless, that is a list of positive projects.

The LEP investment independent evaluation said that the return on investment for the whole programme will be £9 for every £1, so there is some good stuff there. I am always slightly suspicious of ROI figures—it always seems slightly like the Del Boy theory of investments: "Next year, we will be millionaires"—but nevertheless there is some good ROI there that can be effectively demonstrated. LEPs often operate on a larger scale than a local authority, but are obviously smaller and nimbler than central Government. They therefore have an important part to play in the delivery of our local growth and investment plans, imperfect as they are—imperfect as we all are.

4.59 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Rees. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) on securing this important debate and on the case she made, particularly for the value of LEPs. Many of her points about the role of LEPs in skills, business development and attracting inward investment were well made, but I particularly liked her point about their power in terms of convening. That is one value that has been harder to quantify, but it is absolutely important, and when the Minister closes, I hope he will talk about the need for greater certainty—I will make some points about that myself—because that is a clear message that is coming back to all of us. LEPs have shown the value of bringing business together and giving it the chance to help shape a place and the future of local economies. That has been a real success of the model.

I tried to keep pace with the hon. Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith). In the end, I wrote down "sheer volume" for the wonderful achievements in the

Bucks LEP. I was struck by 55% of new starts being in the enterprise zones, which really shows the impact in that community. That relates to the point made by the hon. Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) about getting things done, which is what our constituents want and what we all want for our communities. We talk about long-term projects, but we want to get things done, get the economy moving, get people in work and get them the right skills. Those points were well made.

The hon. Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) sold himself short. My LEP is Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire—D2N2—and the hon. Gentleman was a founder director. It is widely accepted across the patch that it has done a very good job. Those things were very difficult at that time; looking back, it seems a lot easier. He made some points about geography, which was a contested issue in our part of the world at the time, as was the structure. The transition from regional development agencies to the LEP model was quite painful. The hon. Gentleman is widely considered to have done a very good job. That shows that, as well as the value of business in these bodies, there is still, and always will be, an important place for local politicians in shaping a place, whether that is leaders of councils or economic development leads on councils. We should always want them to be part of the work, because the value is in the rich partnership between the public and private sector. There is real opportunity in that.

I do not want to go past the point about geography and overlaps and underlaps, because we are going to go through that now—on steroids—as we move now into the next phase of the levelling-up White Paper and the different plans around devolution. There was some interest when it was about local economic partnerships, but in reality we knew that most of our constituents would not particularly connect with the issue. But they are going to when it starts being about mayoralities and combined authorities, and we are really going to have those conversations, so some of that insight and experience will be very welcome.

Local economic partnerships have been an important forum. In my own community, D2N2 covers 2 million people with an output of £45 billion, and it aims to add another £9 billion. That is the scale of the ambition. The LEP has brought real expertise, and a co-ordinating role, as the hon. Member for Stroud said. That has been particularly clear during the pandemic, where it has pulled the partners together to assist people back into work, to steer local investment and to support businesses to grow. We have been very lucky to have it.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the predecessor bodies. For us, that was the East Midlands Development Agency. In general, regional development agencies were good bodies. I know that the hon. Member for Northampton South does not like the ROI stats, but the evidence for RDAs was very good in that regard, and I feel that the changes were a false economy—a cost-cutting measure. I am not advocating a return to that system, but the governance model we have today, with a partnership between local politicians and local business, plus the heft of the support that RDAs had, might be a better way forward. I would be interested to hear what the Minister foresees.

We face significant challenges in our economy. We have had anaemic growth for a decade. We can have a big argument about why that is, but it is still the reality.

When we look at wage growth, I do not even think it would qualify even as anaemic. The Bank of England is predicting economic growth to be as low as 1% by 2024. Whatever our economic plans, LEPs have to be there to jump-start our economy. There are elements of the levelling-up White Paper that start to address the situation, in concept and rhetoric, and there is lots that we would all agree with, but we now need to hear from Ministers about more than the concept, and about how we are going to tackle the failed model of over-centralisation and genuinely shift power from the centre—from Whitehall to town hall, and then from those town halls to communities themselves. We know that that is what communities want and that when people are treated well and are given the opportunity, they do well. I fear that, in the long journey between now and 2030, if we go on another trip around the deal-making process and the piecemeal model of devolution, it will be very slow and will frustrate progress. I think we can go faster and I hope the Minister might reflect on that.

The White Paper says that the Government are “encouraging the integration of LEPs and their business boards into MCAs, the GLA and County Deals”.

Many LEPs have welcomed that but, very much in the spirit of the comments of the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye in opening the debate, they want to know more about that transition. The White Paper said that further detail would be provided in writing to LEPs. Will the Minister say when that happened or will happen?

I will finish with a couple of quick questions. We are moving into an age of more individual, personalised government. I have to say, that is not to my taste. I think the superman model of leadership is a dated and failed one—and they are virtually always men. I like a Cabinet Government; I think more heads are better together. The value in the LEPs was that they brought together a rich mix of partners. They are very busy people with very important day jobs, and they are going to need to know that their work is valued. If they are downgraded to a business sounding board for a Mayor, then that will be a challenging process. Otherwise, if we are putting all accountability on an individual personage, where will LEPs fit in to that? I am keen to hear what the Minister has to say about that.

The White Paper announced three new innovation accelerators. Can the Minister provide some detail on how LEPs and local government are expected to interact with those? Will they have genuine power and a say in them? Similarly, how will LEPs engage with the new levelling-up directors and the Levelling Up Advisory Council, and how will they provide feedback? We have seen a general sense of enthusiasm for sub-regional business and political leadership on important matters of developing the economy. Saying that sounds almost facile, but that is what we are all saying. We are now moving into a new context through the levelling-up programme. There are many questions that need to be answered, so I hope that we might start to hear answers from the Minister today.

5.06 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Neil O'Brien): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for

[Neil O'Brien]

Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) for securing this important debate. It has been inspirational to hear the many varied things that LEPs are doing across the country: in the south-east, Thames valley, Coventry, Warwickshire, Buckinghamshire, Gloucestershire, and D2N2 in Northamptonshire and the south midlands. They are doing everything from heritage to digital skills and, indeed, fusion power. They have a very exciting agenda and are playing an important role.

The short answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye is that, through the White Paper, LEPs now have certainty about their overall role in the future and how they will fit together with mayoral combined authorities. LEPs will continue to exist where there are no MCAs; where MCAs exist, they can be folded in as the business sounding board where they are co-terminus. Where there is a part-in and part-out LEP, we will respond to whatever the desires of local partners are. They will also shortly have the funding certainty that a number have Members have asked about, because we will be writing to them very shortly.

The longer version of the answer to the great questions that colleagues have asked today is that LEPs have played a very important role in unlocking local economic potential and growth over recent years. Using the convening power that so many Members have talked about, partnerships have forged lasting and productive relationships between business, education and local government. At the same time, they have brought that crucial private sector perspective into local decision making, and indeed into combined authorities. They have delivered major capital investment schemes, some of which have been mentioned today, such as the £12 billion local growth fund and the £900 million Getting Building fund.

LEPs have been really instrumental in supporting businesses through the twin challenges of leaving the EU and responding to the pandemic. As if that were not enough, a lot of businesses are now turning to their LEP and growth hub for guidance and support regarding the current situation with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye said, that is just part of what is driving the 1.6 million visits that she talked about.

Over the past two-year period we have seen LEPs implement a series of actions to strengthen their governance and accountability, and it has made a big difference. In the most recent assurance review we found that every one of the 38 LEPs met our expectations on strategic impact and delivery, and all but one met our expectations on governance. The National Audit Office has noted the progress that LEPs have made over time. In its 2019 report, the NAO highlighted the marked improvement in LEPs' financial transparency between 2016 and 2019. My hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) touched on the marked progress we have seen on the removal of boundary issues between LEPs—an issue that the Government recognise can blur accountability and transparency. Although there is further to go, the majority of those boundary issues have now been dealt with.

I want to thank the people working in LEPs who might watch this debate or read the transcript, because the Government place a huge value on the contribution that they have made and will continue to make to their

local economy. We are grateful to the talented, busy people who serve on LEPs for giving their skills, knowledge and expertise to the community and to improve the functioning of LEPs over time. We look forward to the next stage in our partnership with LEPs.

In some areas of the country, such as the Liverpool city region, West Yorkshire and Greater London, business leaders are effectively integrated into local decision-making structures through combined authorities and the GLA. As Members know, LEP partnerships extend beyond their immediate combined authorities. In a LEP census in 2016, nine out of 10 LEPs reported that they have full engagement with businesses of all sizes and LEPs reported engagement with higher education bodies, so it is not just about the interface with local politicians.

The bigger geographical scale—beyond the council scale—which a number of hon. Members have pointed to, gives LEPs a unique vantage point to bring people together on lots of different subjects. For example, one of the reasons why we use and resource them is to develop local industrial strategies, which have flowed into such things as innovation accelerators. Where innovation accelerators exist, we hope that LEPs and the equivalent bodies in the devolved areas will play a role in shaping what they do.

There are lots of other such examples but today, in 2022, the local growth landscape looks very different from when LEPs were first launched. We have seen the introduction of combined authority Mayors and a number of funds, such as the towns fund, which involves local stakeholders potentially at a sub-local authority level, bringing together lots of partners in the most deprived half of towns. For example, through the local growth fund and the forthcoming shared prosperity fund, we are empowering those in lower-tier local government. Of course, LEPs still play a crucial role in all the different things that they are running and their wider role is also a crucial part of the local growth story.

We are in the process of continuing on the journey of growth in the number of mayoral combined authorities. In the White Paper, we talked about nine new areas that have started talks with Government, including a combined authority deal for York and North Yorkshire and widening the geography of the north-east deal, as well as deepening the deals that have been done for the west midlands and Greater Manchester. Even as we do that, LEPs will continue to have a crucial role outside the areas where there are not electively accountable mayoral-type figures operating across a strategic geography. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye said, in many parts of the country there will be no other body on that kind of scale with that kind of strategic overview of the wider economy, straddling a number of different local authorities.

Following the LEP review, which has concluded, we have clarity about the end state that we want to get to and why we want to continue to have LEPs: for that convening role, the private sector expertise, and the ability to broker lots of different local stakeholders and drive forward a wider strategic vision for the area. That is why we have chosen to keep LEPs and why I pay tribute to them today.

We appreciate the urgent need for certainty of the kind that various hon. Members have raised. We are working to provide that clarity to LEPs at the earliest opportunity. I am sure that Members will appreciate

some of the wider pressures that the Government are facing, given the international situation. It has been useful to have this debate today and to be able to express my thanks and pay tribute to the work of LEPs. We will be in touch with our colleagues in LEPs in the very near future.

Mark Pawsey: One strength of LEPs is that the functional geography was delivered by the LEPs themselves. It was left to people in their own areas to determine what makes a sound economic unit. Does my hon. Friend intend to retain that autonomy within the LEPs, so that we keep that geography rather than relying on historical local government boundaries?

Neil O'Brien: Yes. My hon. Friend has given me a good opportunity to recognise that there is, I think—from my conversations with Coventry and Warwickshire—a strong desire to continue to work together. Without prejudging the outcome of anything, we have said that we will respond to what local places want to do where LEPs straddle areas, being partly in an MCA and partly outside. I am conscious, from all my conversations with those involved in Coventry and Warwickshire, that they have found it useful to work together. I was very impressed by the list of projects that my hon. Friend reeled off that they were leading in Coventry and Warwickshire. We are absolutely conscious of what local people want—yes, absolutely. Let me end by saying that we will continue to respond to what local places want and how they want to work together to drive forward their local economy and get more good jobs in all these different parts of the country.

5.16 pm

Sally-Ann Hart: I thank the Minister for his fantastic response and the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) for his contribution, as well as my hon. Friends the Members for Buckingham (Greg Smith), for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) and for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) for their excellent contributions, and my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) for his contribution through interventions.

LEPs clearly have a role to play and are an asset to all the constituencies represented today. They are not perfect, but they have the ability to harness the power of businesses and they have a commerciality about them that local authorities just do not have. When it comes to decision making on the if, why, how, when and what of spending money, it is really important that we have the LEP voice in our regions. LEPs really do encourage business growth. If we want to develop a culture of enterprise in this country, LEPs really do play an important role in that. They really do manage to convene partnerships, which is one of their strengths. I was therefore delighted to hear the Minister's confirmation that LEPs will continue and will be funded and that clarity will be provided soon.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the status of Local Enterprise Partnerships.

5.17 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 16 March 2022

DEFENCE

Ministry of Defence Financial Update

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): On Thursday 10 March 2022 I authorised the release of £393.8 million to discharge the debt owed by the Ministry of Defence-owned company, International Military Services Limited (IMS).

The debt resulted from contracts which were signed between IMS Ltd. and the pre-revolution Iranian Government. Following the Iranian revolution, the contracts were not fulfilled, despite prepayments made by Iran to the UK. The UK courts and the International Court of Arbitration (ICC) subsequently confirmed that the debt was still owed to the Iranian Government.

The payment of the debt reflects the UK Government's determination to meet that international obligation, while seeking to ensure that such funds can only be used in accordance with applicable sanctions, and domestic counter-terrorism and anti-money laundering legislation, for example to purchase humanitarian goods.

I have been a consistent campaigner on IMS settlement, including as Chairman of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Iran and securing a Westminster Hall debate in March 2014 in which I called to "honour the debt once and for all".

[HCWS689]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Delivering the Environment Act

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): We are today launching our consultation on legally binding targets under the Environment Act to leave our environment in a better state than we found it. This includes a world-leading target to halt the decline of nature by 2030. This is our compass, spurring action of the scale required to address biodiversity loss. We are also proposing targets for air quality, water, trees, marine protected areas, biodiversity, and waste reduction and resource efficiency.

This goes beyond the legal minimum required under the Act and will support the delivery of many of the Government's priorities, including to reach net zero by 2050, build resilience against the impacts of a changing climate, and level up all corners of the country.

In order to meet these targets, we must move the emphasis away from bureaucratic EU processes that have not done enough to moderate the pace of nature's decline, and instead put in place the governance regime that can deliver nature's recovery. That is why we are publishing a Green Paper today, setting out proposals to create a system which better reflects the latest science, has regard for our domestic species and habitats, and delivers nature recovery.

We have always said we will take a cautious and evidence-led approach to any reform. This Green Paper is the next step in setting out our ideas and gathering views to inform our approach.

Our protected sites and nutrient pollution

As set out in our 25 year environment plan, England's protected sites are a vitally important part of this Government's ambitious commitments on the environment, including delivering the target to halt species decline by 2030. Nutrient pollution is a particular problem for our freshwater habitats and estuaries. Increased levels of nutrients—especially nitrogen and phosphorus—can ultimately damage protected sites and the wildlife that live there.

Many of our most internationally important water bodies are designated as protected sites under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017. Under the Habitats Regulations, competent authorities, such as local planning authorities and the Environment Agency, must assess the environmental impact of planning applications or local plans. As a result of these regulations and European case law, Natural England has advised that in areas where protected sites are in "unfavourable condition" due to nutrient pollution, Local planning authorities can only approve a project if they are certain it will have no negative effect on the protected site.

Following further work to understand the sources of site deterioration, Natural England has today issued updated advice and support to the 32 local planning authorities currently affected by nutrient pollution, as well as 42 new local planning authorities. So far this approach has too often been complex, time-consuming and costly to apply, and Government is clear that action is needed to make sure that we both deliver the homes and communities need and address pollution at source.

First, to help all local planning authorities affected to navigate this requirement, Natural England has published a "nutrient calculator" to enable development to take place in a sustainable way. The Government is offering £100,000 to each affected catchment to support cross-local authority work to meet Natural England requirements and enable development to continue.

These solutions are pragmatic short-term steps but do not amount to a permanent solution that will improve water quality and allow sustainable development to proceed, and so we are going further. The Government already has highly ambitious plans to reduce nutrient pollution from both agriculture and sewage works and has further plans for the future. We have also secured a series of pledges from water companies to provide new funding for nature-based "strategic solutions" to tackle nutrient pollution. We welcome the new and proactive investment from Severn Trent Water, United Utilities, South West Water and Yorkshire Water in collectively investing an additional £24.5 million in reducing nutrient pollution affecting these sites, including nature-based solutions. We will work with the wider industry to deliver further action, as far as possible.

Finally, we will explore legislation to further strengthen requirements to reduce nutrients at source enabling more sustainable development. This will provide greater certainty for local authorities.

[HCWS688]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Healthcare Professional Regulators' Emergency Registers

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): In response to the covid-19 pandemic, to support the National Health Service and social care providers, the Government enabled some healthcare professional regulators to establish temporary emergency registers. The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) and the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) maintain emergency registers using powers conferred to them under the Coronavirus Act (CVA) 2020; the General Medical Council (GMC) and the General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC) maintain emergency registers using existing powers. The circumstances for justifying the continuation of these emergency registers are reducing as the impact of the pandemic reduces. I am today announcing our intention that the emergency registers will close on 30 September 2022. This will provide those healthcare professionals who are practising on the basis of emergency registration six months in which to take up full registration if they so wish. Prior to the closure of the emergency registers the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid) will notify the regulators that the emergency conditions no longer apply, and the registers will close.

Context

The NMC and the HCPC currently maintain emergency registers using powers conferred to them under the Coronavirus Act (CVA) 2020. Under section 89 of the CVA, the Act will automatically expire two years after coming into force. This means that, following expiry, the NMC and HCPC will no longer be able to add new registrants to their emergency registers, but those already registered will remain so until the register is subsequently closed. The GMC and the GPhC currently maintain emergency registers using powers they held prior to the pandemic.

The powers to set up emergency registers, both under the CVA s.2 and in the GMC and GPhC legislation, can only be exercised where the Secretary of State declares a state of emergency to exist.

To manage the closure of the emergency registers and mitigate any impact on the NHS workforce we are providing regulators, registrants and employers with six months' notice of the closure of the registers, in order to facilitate transfers between emergency and permanent registers. At the end of this notice period the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care will notify the regulators that the circumstance required for emergency registration no longer apply. Once this notification is made the emergency registers will close and those professionals on the emergency register will be unable to continue to practice.

[HCWS686]

Hymenoplasty

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): On 23 December 2021, as part of the "Vision for the Women's Health Strategy in England" publication, the Government announced its intention to ban the hymenoplasty procedure in the United Kingdom at the earliest opportunity:

Our Vision for the Women's Health Strategy for England - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

We are already working to ban virginity testing and introduced a Government amendment to the Health and Care Bill in November to do so. Banning hymenoplasty is another important milestone in the Government's ongoing mission to tackle violence against women and girls.

Hymenoplasty, a procedure which involves reconstructing the hymen, is a tool of honour-based abuse and, like virginity testing, is used to oppress vulnerable women and girls.

The Government's decision to ban hymenoplasty followed the recommendations of an independent expert panel (the panel), that was established to look at the clinical and ethical implications of banning the procedure. The panel was made up of clinicians, ethicists, and subject matter experts and I would like to place on record my thanks to all members of the panel for their input in this process.

The panel made a suite of recommendations in their final report: Expert panel on hymenoplasty - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk), which we are accepting in full. This includes introducing legislation to create a criminal offence of hymenoplasty alongside the prohibition of virginity testing; ensuring there are no medical exemptions including for victims of rape; issuing guidance to support healthcare professionals to carry out risk assessments when hymenoplasty is requested; and providing adequate resources for community engagement.

Our work to ban the harmful practice of virginity testing and our commitment to banning the hymenoplasty procedure demonstrate that the safety of women and girls is at the forefront of this Government's agenda.

By banning both procedures this Government will ensure the United Kingdom is a safer place for women and girls.

[HCWS690]

TRANSPORT

HS2 Six-monthly Report of Parliament: March 2022

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): Review of High Speed Two (HS2) including programme update, local community impact and engagement, environment, benefits, and programme governance.

Overview

This is my fourth update to Parliament on High Speed Two (HS2). I can confirm that the project remains within budget and on schedule in delivering Phase One (London-West Midlands) and phase 2a (West Midlands-Crewe), we have hit major construction milestones, made substantial progress on key procurements, and made significant progress to take HS2 further North. Work is also already underway to implement the proposals set out in the Government's Integrated Rail Plan (IRP) for the North and Midlands, for example with the recent introduction of a Bill into Parliament to build HS2 between Crewe and Manchester.

Key achievements in this reporting period—September 2021 to January 2022 are:

HS2 is now supporting over 22,000 jobs.

Introduction of a Bill into Parliament to secure the powers to construct and maintain HS2 between Crewe and Manchester. This will increase capacity, bolster connectivity, and reduce travel

times from the North West to London and Birmingham and will be critical to generating transformational economic change in the North West.

The Government have published their Integrated Rail Plan (IRP) for the North and Midlands.

Award of the £2 billion contract—under budget—for the delivery and maintenance of HS2 trains for Phases One and 2a. The state-of-the-art train fleet, capable of speeds of up to 225 miles per hour, will be designed and built by a Hitachi/Alstom Joint Venture based in the North East and Midlands.

Launch of the first Tunnel Boring Machine (TBM) in the Midlands, the third on the programme. The two other TBMs in the Chilterns are making good progress and have now driven a combined distance of approximately 3.5 miles.

Public commitment to power HS2 trains with zero carbon energy from day one—supporting the goal of making HS2 net zero from 2035—and publication of HS2 Ltd's Environmental Sustainability Progress Report in January 2022.

The five years of compulsory purchase powers on Phase One provided by the Phase One Act ended on 23 February 2022 with all planned notices served by the deadline set by Parliament.

Release of the Invitation to Tender for the Phase 2a Design and Delivery Partner (DDP). The DDP will act as a strategic partner for HS2 Ltd to drive efficient design and construction in extending the railway to Crewe.

A decision has been taken to support greater integration between the HS2 and Network Rail stations at Euston. This has potential to deliver construction efficiencies, along with significant passenger and place-making benefits at Euston and the surrounding area.

I am delighted to confirm that we are expanding Sir Jon Thompson's role, an existing non-executive director on the HS2 Ltd Board, to become Deputy Chair. Sir Jon will chair meetings of the Board until a permanent Chair is in post.

This report primarily uses data provided by HS2 Ltd to the HS2 Ministerial Task Force for Phases One and 2a and covers the period between September 2021 and January 2022 inclusive. Unless stated, all figures are presented in 2019 prices.

Programme update

Schedule

On Phase One (London to West Midlands), the forecast for initial services from Old Oak Common to Birmingham remains within the Delivery into Service (DiS) range of 2029 to 2033. The revised schedule agreed last year has held to date with local delays being largely mitigated.

Over the reporting period, good progress has been made on closing out the majority of enabling works, with the remaining work due to be completed by early next year. Good progress has also been made on tunnelling activities. Additionally, HS2 Ltd has advanced its earthworks. Maintaining construction progress depends on the detailed design and consents needed to support a further very significant increase in civil works on earthworks and structures in 2022.

The main areas of schedule focus remain in the southern section of the line-of-route and tunnels leading into Old Oak Common Station from outer London, which form the critical path for initial services. Any delays in these sectors could delay the whole project. Other key watch areas include Bromford Tunnel, Birmingham Curzon Street Station and the route into Birmingham where the urban environment generates significant logistical challenges.

Phase 2a remains on track to be delivered between 2030 and 2034. Land possessions have commenced and enabling works started in early 2022.

As confirmed in the update on the Phase 2b Western Leg (Crewe to Manchester) Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) in January 2022, the Department has set a schedule range of 2035 to 2041 for the opening of the Phase 2b Western Leg.

Affordability

HS2 remains within budget. The overall budget for Phase One remains £44.6 billion. This is composed of the target cost of £40.3 billion and additional Government-retained contingency of £4.3 billion. The target cost includes contingency delegated to HS2 Ltd of £5.6 billion for managing risk and uncertainties.

To date, out of the Phase One target cost of £40.3 billion, £14.9 billion has been spent, with an additional £0.8 billion for land and property provisions. £12.7 billion has been contracted and has not been spent, with the remaining amount not yet under contract.

HS2 Ltd has drawn £1.3 billion of its £5.6 billion delegated contingency, meaning £4.3 billion remains. Contingency drawn to date reflects an increase of £0.5 billion since my last update—from £0.8 billion to £1.3 billion.

HS2 Ltd's is reporting £1.7 billion of potential future cost pressures that are currently presenting across the programme. This reflects an increase in potential further cost pressures of £0.4 billion since my last update—from £1.3 billion to £1.7 billion.

Since my last report, the aggregate increase in actual and potential additional costs is therefore £0.9 billion—£0.5 billion from increase in contingency drawdown plus £0.4 billion from potential further cost pressures. While these pressures are manageable within the target cost given the remaining contingency, I am nonetheless concerned at the rate of their increase. I expect HS2 Ltd to maintain its focus on delivery to the target cost.

Should these or other cost pressures materialise, HS2 Ltd will continue to draw from the contingency it holds, of which £4.3 billion remains—as outlined above. Out of the £1.7 billion of net potential pressures currently being reported by HS2 Ltd in its January 2022 data, over and above the contingency drawn down so far, the key pressures are:

An estimate of £0.8 billion—increase of £0.2 billion from my last update—for potential additional main works civils costs stemming from additional design costs and slower than expected progress in some areas.

A pressure of £0.4 billion on the cost estimate for the HS2 Euston station. The move to a smaller, less complex 10-platform single-stage delivery strategy at Euston, as confirmed in my previous report, is now the basis for ongoing design work and other activities. The Department anticipates that this will assist in addressing the cost pressure at Euston, as the updated station design is developed over the coming months. This work will also consider and address the appropriate level of contingency that should be held to managing risks that are likely to arise during the construction of an asset of this complexity. The Department will provide further updates as this work progresses over the course of the next 18 months.

A pressure of £0.2 billion against HS2 Ltd's budget for changes to Network Rail infrastructure at Euston and Old Oak Common that are required to facilitate the new HS2 stations.

There is a further £0.3 billion of net cost pressures presenting on other parts of the programme. This is the aggregate total of smaller potential cost pressures.

Over £0.8 billion in savings and efficiencies from across the programme—increase of £0.5 billion from my last update—have been identified against HS2 Ltd's budget, principally from awarding the rolling stock contract under budget, contracting a common supplier for lifts and escalators, and savings in the acquisition of land and property. These have partly offset gross cost pressures. HS2 Ltd continues to focus on realising further efficiencies and opportunities to reduce the costs of Phase One.

On covid-19 costs, HS2 Ltd's assessment of the likely financial impact of the pandemic on delivering Phase One remains estimated within the range of £0.4 billion to £0.7 billion. Formal claims will be subject to Government scrutiny and will require formal approval from Her Majesty's Treasury before funds from Government-retained contingency can be allocated.

For Phase 2a, the overall cost range is £5.2 billion to £7.2 billion. We intend to set a target cost alongside publication of the full business case next year.

As confirmed in the update on the Phase 2b (Crewe to Manchester) SOBC, the estimated cost range for the Crewe-Manchester scheme is £15 billion to £22 billion. It is project delivery best practice to set a range and to narrow this down over time.

Lastly, the Department and HS2 Ltd are currently working to assess and mitigate the impact of global inflationary pressure on materials and labour supply on the programme where short term increases are being seen. This is likely caused in part by the recovery of global construction demand following the covid-19 pandemic.

Delivery

On Phase One, delivery continues to build momentum at 340 sites. Tunnel drives are underway at two sites. In the Chilterns, Tunnel Boring Machines (TBMs) 'Florence' and 'Cecilia' have been making good progress and have currently tunnelled a combined distance of approximately 3.5 miles. In December 2021, we saw the launch of 'Dorothy'—the first TBM in the Midlands—which will preserve the Long Itchington Wood in Warwickshire. The tunnelling team will operate the machine for around five months as it excavates the first bore of the one-mile tunnel. This will be the first HS2 tunnel to be completed on the project, with the machine set to break through its first bore at the south portal later this spring when it will return to the start to begin the second parallel tunnel.

At Old Oak Common Station, significant progress has been made in constructing the 750,000 metres-cubed box structure that will facilitate the six subterranean high-speed line platforms, as well as the works required to facilitate the start of tunnel boring to Euston in the east and Northolt in the west. Work is underway with the Old Oak Common and Park Royal Development Corporation, the London Mayor and the Department for Levelling Up, Homes and Communities to bring forward proposals for the regeneration of the area around the station.

In the West Midlands, stage one of the two-stage design and build contract for Birmingham Curzon Street Station will conclude shortly subject to agreement of an

affordable target price. A solution for co-construction of the West Midlands Metro tram extension while delivering the station has been agreed with Transport for the West Midlands so that benefits of both projects can be brought to Birmingham as soon as practicable.

In September 2021, HS2 Ltd launched the process to appoint a design and build contractor to complete Interchange Station in Solihull. Contract award remains on schedule for summer 2022. Central and local government are also working with the private sector to bring forward proposals to release land for development. This would enable approximately 350 acres of land to support the Arden Cross Masterplan, creating a space for innovation, business, learning and living, providing up to 27,000 new jobs and 3,000 new homes and is backed by conditional Government funding of £50 million.

A decision has been taken to proceed with greater integration between the HS2 and Network Rail stations at Euston. The Department and Network Rail are developing the business case for the redevelopment of the Network Rail station concourse at Euston in parallel with the HS2 build, which will support greater integration between the HS2 and Network Rail stations. HS2 Ltd and Network Rail, with support from The Euston Partnership, are working together to develop a cost effective design that provides integration between the HS2 station and the redevelopment of the Network Rail station and delivers value for money for the taxpayer. This integrated approach has potential to deliver construction efficiencies, along with significant passenger and place-making benefits at Euston.

I am delighted to confirm that we reached a major milestone on the procurement of HS2 trains. In December, an Alstom/Hitachi Joint Venture was awarded the £2 billion HS2 rolling stock contract for Phases One and 2a and is expected to support around 2,500 jobs across the UK. This contract includes the design and build of 54 new high-speed trains and an initial 12-year maintenance period. The trains will be manufactured in Newton Aycliffe, Derby and Crewe and then maintained at the new depot in Washwood Heath, Birmingham. The second-placed bidder, Siemens, continues to challenge the procurement decision legally but has not sought to impede the award and delivery of the rolling stock contract.

HS2 Ltd continues tendering for Phase One and 2a rail systems packages—including track, catenary, mechanical and electrical fitout, power, control and communications. Over the coming months, HS2 Ltd will request bidders to submit their final price and I anticipate that we will begin awarding these packages in early 2023. In the next six months, HS2 Ltd will further develop their approach to integration of these rail systems packages. This will include testing operational processes and systems, development of its leadership capability and standing up of interim governance arrangements.

On Phase 2a (West Midlands to Crewe), HS2 Ltd has invited tenders for a Design and Delivery Partner (DDP) in January 2022. Additionally, the start of procurement for the Main Works Civils Framework is expected to commence later this year which will provide the construction capacity to be managed by the DDP. Early environmental works and early civils works have also begun.

Integrated Rail Plan for the North and Midlands

The Government have published their Integrated Rail Plan (IRP) for the North and Midlands. It sets a £96 billion strategy of rail construction and upgrades for the North and Midlands to be delivered over the next 30 years. Work is also already underway to implement the proposals set out in the IRP.

For example, £249 million was invested to further electrify the Midland Main Line between Kettering and Market Harborough with work started at Christmas 2021. The HS2 Phase 2b Crewe-Manchester scheme sits at the core of the IRP, bringing high-speed rail to Manchester and providing vital infrastructure necessary to deliver the Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) scheme. On 24 January 2022, the Government introduced the High Speed Rail (Crewe – Manchester) Bill to secure the powers to construct and maintain the HS2 Phase 2b Western Leg. Once approved, the railway will be critical to generating transformational economic change in the North West of England. Once the Crewe to Manchester section of HS2 opens, the railway will reduce travel times from 2 hours 5 minutes to around 1 hour 10 minutes from London to Manchester. The introduction of the Bill into Parliament was accompanied by an environmental statement and an update on the 2017 SOBC.

The IRP also confirmed the Government's intention to take forward HS2 East, a new highspeed line between West Midlands and East Midlands Parkway, enabling HS2 to serve Nottingham and Derby city centres. In conjunction with plans for the electrification of the Midland Main Line, this will also allow HS2 trains to continue direct to Chesterfield and Sheffield. Following a pause to design work on the HS2 Eastern Leg as a result of the Oakervee Review, the Department and HS2 Ltd are considering how best to take forward this new West to East Midlands high-speed line working closely with Network Rail. The IRP provides £100 million to look at the most effective way to run HS2 trains to Leeds, including understanding the most optimal solution for Leeds station capacity and starting work on the new West Yorkshire mass transit system.

Local community impact and engagement

As HS2 Minister, I expect affected communities to be at the heart of our plans for this project. I am therefore pleased that HS2 Ltd's refreshed community engagement strategy—'Respecting People, Respecting Places'—has this vision at its core and sets out HS2 Ltd's renewed commitments to the communities impacted by the programme.

One of the ways that the HS2 project counterbalances some of its negative impacts on places is through the Community and Environment Fund and the Business and Local Economy Fund. These funds have now supported 192 projects through £11.1 million of grant funding along the line-of-route and play a crucial role in ensuring a positive legacy for communities most affected by construction.

HS2 Ltd has also recently launched several initiatives to continue actively engaging communities affected by HS2. For example, 'In your area' is an interactive map which informs people of HS2 works in their area. Furthermore, independent construction inspectors continue to support the assurance of the delivery of works. Where problems do arise, the Construction Commissioner

provides a means of escalation and independent consideration. I am pleased to report that the existing Construction Commissioner, Sir Mark Worthington OBE, has been reappointed for a further three years. Additionally, I am currently recruiting a replacement for the outgoing Residents' Commissioner, Deborah Fazan.

Targeted protester activity continues to have some impact on Phase One delivery. However, following successful removal of the unlawful protester site at Small Dean near Wendover in October and November 2021, protest impact on Phase One has now been reduced significantly. HS2 Ltd estimates that ongoing protester activity, including the removal of encampments and protest-related delays to the programme, has cost just under £12.2 million, an increase of £42 million since my last report. HS2 Ltd continues to work with its supply chain, local police forces and wider Government to minimise the impact of unlawful protester activity.

Land and Property

I am pleased to announce that the five years of compulsory purchase powers on Phase One provided by the Phase One Act ended on 23 February 2022 with the serving of all planned notices by the deadline set by Parliament. While work to complete the land acquisition and, crucially, settle compensation for affected property owners will continue, this is an important milestone for the programme.

Significant progress has also been made to implement the proposals set out in my 2020 Land and Property Review: three-quarters of the proposals have now been implemented. The response to our recent public Land and Property consultation was also published in February 2022.

Environment

In January, HS2 Ltd published its 'Environmental Sustainability Vision' which reaffirmed its commitment to provide low carbon rail travel for a cleaner, greener future.

I was delighted to confirm, as part of that Vision, that HS2 trains will use zero carbon energy from day one of operation. This will support HS2 Ltd target to achieve net zero in construction and operation from 2035. The commitment is a key part of the new HS2 'Net Zero Carbon Plan' which sets out a suite of ambitious new targets to reduce the carbon footprint of the programme.

The Vision confirmed that HS2 Ltd will seek to deliver a 10% net gain in biodiversity for replaceable habitats on the Phase 2b Crewe-Manchester scheme. I also intend to explore going beyond the existing no-net-loss of biodiversity target for Phase One and Phase 2a, to secure biodiversity gains where this is cost-effective and possible within existing funding limits.

Lastly, HS2 Ltd published its first 'Environmental Sustainability Progress Report' in January. This provides a clear and up-to-date account of HS2's environmental impacts and the progress being made to mitigate any adverse effects.

Benefits

I am delighted to announce that HS2 is supporting over 22,000 jobs and to date over 2,400 UK-registered companies have delivered work on HS2. To date, there

have been 1,674 jobs starts by people who were previously workless. The programme will create 2,000 apprenticeships, with 825 having been started since 2017.

In November 2021, HS2 Ltd construction partner Balfour Beatty VINCI opened a new ‘Skills Academy’ in the West Midlands in partnership with South and City College of Birmingham.

As stated in the Government’s ‘Levelling Up White Paper’, this year, the Government will publish a HS2 Local Growth Action Plan, setting out how it will work with places hosting Phase One and 2a stations to realise their local growth ambitions. The new railway will stimulate growth around HS2 stations and further afield, helping to level up the economies of the Midlands and North.

Promoting active travel along the HS2 route and at stations is also a key priority for me. To ensure that opportunities for lasting legacy improvements are realised, I have asked HS2 Ltd to explore the potential for the re-purposing of temporary construction routes, into new vehicle-free connections between rural communities that could connect other emerging local authority cycle proposals to provide a wider active travel network along the spine of HS2. This will not only benefit the environment, but also improve the health and wellbeing of residents and commuters. In addition, I have asked HS2 Ltd to upgrade active travel provisions at 12 locations across Phase One.

Programme Governance

An updated HS2 Ltd framework document and HS2 development agreement will be concluded shortly to continue effective governance between the Department

and HS2 Ltd. Furthermore, we have relaunched the search for a new Chair with updated role criteria to appeal to a wider set of candidates. In parallel, we are expanding Sir Jon Thompson’s role, an existing non-executive director on the HS2 Ltd Board, to become Deputy Chair. Sir Jon will chair meetings of the Board until a permanent Chair is in post.

Lastly, as committed to in my previous update, all recommendations from the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) report of 22 September 2021 have now been implemented.

Forward Look

On Phase One, over the next six months we will continue the ramp-up of construction work, launch the fourth TBM on the programme to start excavation of the London tunnels, and we will see HS2 Ltd award a contract for the construction of interchange station.

On Phase 2a, focus will be on progressing environmental and enabling work, early land acquisitions plus the procurement for the DDP and progressing the procurement for the main works civils framework.

On Phase 2b, following the introduction of the High Speed Rail (Crewe – Manchester) Bill into Parliament, the Environmental Statement Consultation is now underway, which will close on 31 March 2022. The priority for HS2 East is to develop the next stage of design work for the West to East Midlands high-speed line.

I will continue to engage closely with Parliament and will provide my next update in autumn 2022.

Financial Annex ¹

Phase	Forecast costs by Phase	
	Target cost	Total estimate costs range ²
One	£40.3 billion	£35 billion to £45 billion
2a	To be determined	£5 billion to £7 billion
2b Western Leg	To be determined	£15 billion to £22 billion ³
HS2 East (West to East Midlands) ⁴	To be determined	To be determined

¹ All figures in this report are presented in 2019 prices unless otherwise stated

² Rounded to nearest billion

³ As confirmed in the update on the Phase 2b (Crewe-Manchester) Strategic Outline Business Case, published in January 2022

⁴ The Government confirmed in the IRP that a high-speed between the West and East Midlands—known as HS2 East—will be taken forward, with HS2 trains continuing to Nottingham, and to Chesterfield/Sheffield (via Derby) on the upgraded conventional rail network.

Historic and forecast expenditure—including land and property				
Phase	Overall spend to date (£bn)	2021 to 2022 budget (£bn)	2021 to 2022 forecast (£bn)	Variance (£bn)
One ⁵	15.7	5.0	5.0	0
2a	0.6	0.2	0.2	0
2b Western Leg	0.5	0.2	0.2	0
HS2 East (West Midlands to East Midlands) and East Midlands to Leeds ⁶	0.6 ⁶	0.0	0.0	0
Total	17.4	5.4	5.4	0

⁵ Spend to date stated above for Phase One includes a £0.8 billion liability (provision) representing the Department’s obligation to purchase land and property.

⁶ The Government is proceeding with HS2 East—the new high-speed line between the West and East Midlands—and is providing £100 million to look at the most effective way to run HS2 trains to Leeds, including understanding the most optimal solution for Leeds station capacity, and starting work on the new West Yorkshire Mass Transit System. As at the end of January 2022, £0.48 billion—rounded in actual prices—had been spent developing the HS2 Eastern Leg to Leeds, including workforce. A substantial proportion of this has been spent on HS2 East—the West to East Midlands section of the HS2 Eastern Leg—which is proceeding as confirmed in the IRP. A further £0.15 billion—rounded in actual prices—has been spent on land and property along the full HS2 Eastern Leg to Leeds, and again a substantial proportion of that land and property spend is along the section between the West and East Midlands. Any land or property not ultimately required for the railway will be resold, enabling us to recover costs.

Evolution of Phase One HS2 Ltd contingency drawdown over last 4 Parliamentary reports

	October 2020 Parliamentary Report	March 2021 Parliamentary Report	October 2021 Parliamentary Report	March 2022 Parliamentary Report
Total HS2 Ltd contingency drawdown and % used	£0.3 billion (5%)	£0.4 billion (7%)	£0.8 billion (14%)	£1.3 billion (23%)
Total HS2 Ltd contingency remaining	£5.3 billion (95%)	£5.2 billion (93%)	£4.8 billion (86%)	£4.3 billion (77%)

Evolution of Phase One Government-retained contingency drawdown over last 4 Parliamentary reports

	October 2020 Parliamentary Report	March 2021 Parliamentary Report	October 2021 Parliamentary Report	March 2022 Parliamentary Report
Total Government-retained contingency drawdown and % used	£0 billion (0%)	£0 billion (0%)	£0 billion (0%)	£0 billion (0%) ⁷
Total Government-retained contingency remaining	£4.3 billion (100%)	£4.3 billion (100%)	£4.3 billion (100%)	£4.3 billion (100%)

⁷ As with my October 2021 report, £0.015 billion has been allocated to enable Old Oak Common to increase the number of trains it runs from three to six trains per hour but has not yet been drawn down from Government-retained contingency.

[HCWS687]

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